Dr. Sudesh M. B. Bhowate currently holds the position of Associate Professor and Head of the Department of English at Dr. Madhukarrao Wasnik P.W.S. Arts, Commerce and Science College, situated on Kamptee Road, Nagpur-26. He is recognized as a P. G. approved educator at R.T.M. Nagpur University and previously served as a Lecturer (CHB) in the Department of Linguistics, Foreign & Indian Languages at the same university in 2007. Additionally, he is an active E.C. Member (West Zone) of the Association of English Studies of India (AESI) and serves as an Executive Member of the Ambedkarite Movement of Culture and Literature in Nagpur. Dr. Bhowate earned his Post Graduation in English, along with three additional M.A. in Linguistics, Political Science, and Buddhist Studies. He possesses both an M. Phil and a Ph.D. in English, in addition to an M.B.A. in Educational Management. He successfully cleared the UGC-NET in English for Lectureship in 2005. Dr. Bhowate has presented a multitude of research papers at various National and International Seminars/Conferences, concentrating on English Literature and English Language Teaching (ELT). Numerous research papers authored by him have been published in Conference Volumes as well as in several National and International Journals. He has also received invitations to present papers at IIAS, Shimla (2017) and has acted as a guest speaker and resource person at numerous universities across the nation, where he has delivered lectures on Modern Literary Criticism and Dalit Literature. In the past, he has authored three books: 'Developing English Competency through Reading Comprehension: A Case Study' (2021), 'A Critical Analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan' (2023) & Buddhist Influences on Dalit Literature (2025). Furthermore, he has translated two books and edited seminar volumes for the college. At present, he holds the position of Editor for 'Perspectives', a peer-reviewed National Research Journal published by his college. In addition, he has produced a series of video tutorials on English Literary Criticism for the college's You Tube channel, PWS Teachers (Official). His areas of special interest encompass Literary Anthropology, English Language Teaching (ELT), Modern Literary Criticism, Indian Writing in English, as well as Dalit and Buddhist Studies, among other topics.

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Dr. Sudesh Meera Baliram Bhowate

WAINGANGA VALLEY

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Contemporary Dalit Literature

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Address
54, Sahyog Nagar, Nari Ring Road, Nagpur-26
E-mail: sudeshbhowate@gmail.com
Mobile: 9823419389

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Dedicated to

all the Ambedkarite creative writers, activists, and performing artists of the Dalit Literary Movement, who devoted their lives to social change and used their creativity to carry forward the philosophy of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar for the upliftment of the 'broken Man' at the margins.

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I extend my gratitude to the journals where some articles in this book were first published. These have been substantially revised to reflect current scholarship, and it is hoped that their inclusion in this volume will be acceptable.

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Last but not least, I extend my thanks to all who supported me, directly or indirectly, throughout this journey.

May all beings be Happy!

Preface

It gives me immense pleasure to offer *'The Modern Critical Approaches to Contemporary Dalit Literature'* to readers, with the aspiration that it encourages thoughtful engagement and dialogue. While the book is primarily intended for academic audiences and socially engaged readers and of course to the writers, translators and activists who engaged with Dalit literature as a tool for social critique. Critical works are often seen as bridges that connect creative texts with new perspectives. I hope this volume will serve in the same way by helping readers engage with Dalit literature through fresh critical approaches. Dalit creative writings hold immense potential to illuminate pressing issues of Indian society, including social and political struggles as well as the continuing economic exploitation of Dalits. At the same time, they embody the enduring call for liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice, carrying forward the vision of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for a casteless India, *the 'Prabuddha Bharat'*.

The essays included in this anthology were written over a period of nearly two decades, many of them originally prepared for conference presentations and later revised for publication in journals. Having taught Literary Criticism and Theories at the postgraduate level for more than two decades, I find myself in a unique position to approach Dalit literature from perspectives that extend beyond the conventional methods of evaluation and appreciation. For a long time, I was uncertain about how Dalit writers might respond to critical engagement with modern Western theories, particularly postmodern and postcolonial frameworks. Yet, I gradually realized that these

theoretical approaches offer valuable tools to probe deeper into Dalit creative expression, uncovering not only the collective consciousness of the writers but also the socio-political and cultural conditions that compel them to struggle for the upliftment of marginalized communities. Although I never treated this as a formally structured project, I have consistently applied various theoretical lenses to Dalit literature over time. During my M.Phil. Dissertation, for instance, I drew upon Western thinkers to explore the theme of identity crisis, while also recognizing how feminist theories long intertwined with the Ambedkarite movement have inspired Dalit activists and writers to interrogate the double marginalization faced by women under patriarchy.

I was fortunate to develop close associations with eminent Dalit writers such as Late Dr. Omprakash Valmiki, Late Waman Nimbalkar, Noted Ambedkarite thinker Mr. Tarachand Khandekar, Noted Playwright Dadakant Dhanvijay, Noted Poet Loknath Yashwant, Noted playwright and theatre artist Sanjay Jiwane, Theatre Artist & Popular Radio Announcer Ashok Jambhulkar, Poet Dr. Machchindra Chormare, Poet Mahendra Gaikwad and occasional meetings with Ambedkarite Thinker and celebrated author Dr. Yashwant Manohar from my Post Graduation days. Through our conversations, Dr. Valmiki and Loknath Yashwant in particular, reassured me that they welcomed the application of Western theories to Dalit literature, provided that the essential principles of Dalit aesthetics were respected. The first important step in this direction was an article on Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan'. The analysis drew on Erik Erikson's concept of identity formation and Linda Anderson's work on autobiography, both of which had informed earlier research during my dissertation. Valmiki himself acknowledged the approach, and the study was later expanded into a book, published in 2023 nearly fifteen years after its completion. This engagement was shaped and strengthened by the

encouragement of my mentor and lifelong teacher Professor Dr. Vandana Pathak often shared her readings and encouraged the use of modern and postcolonial theories in the study of Dalit literature. Equally significant was the guidance of my former Ph.D. supervisor, Professor Dr. Shoma Sen, former Head of the Department of English at RTM Nagpur University. During our time teaching together at the college, she entrusted me despite my recent appointment with the responsibility of teaching Literary Criticism and Theories at the postgraduate level. She also encouraged and fostered discussions within the department that linked Dalit literature with contemporary critical theories. Another important influence was Dr. B. Rangrao, noted writer and former Professor and Head of the Department of English Literature. Attending his lectures on modern criticism in Nagpur, as well as reading his journal articles where he consistently applied modern critical frameworks to Dalit texts, further encouraged this line of inquiry. These combined influences laid the foundation for later explorations, including a Dalit feminist interpretation of P. Sivakami's 'Grip of Change' and an analysis of protest in Jyoti Lanjewar's 'Red Slogan on Green Grass'. Over time, it became increasingly clear that broader frameworks such as psychoanalysis, deconstruction, subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory could offer further insights into Dalit literature.

A defining moment in my academic journey came during the Refresher Course at the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, in 2015. The program provided me with the intellectual space to develop an article that reflected my longstanding interest in applying critical theories to Dalit literature. Around this time, my sustained engagement with poet Loknath Yashwant inspired me to undertake a focused project: a psychoanalytic reading of his poetry. I presented this analysis at the UGC-HRDC, University of Kerala, where it was warmly received by my colleagues, including Dr. Jibu Matthew

George (EFL University, Hyderabad), Dr. Amarendra Pandey (Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad), and Dr. Prasenjit Panda (Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur). Their appreciation encouraged me to continue exploring new theoretical approaches to Dalit texts. Later, when I shared the manuscript with Loknath Yashwant, he expressed his delight, noting that my interpretations had captured precisely what he had sought to reveal through his poetry.

My next pursuit was to explore how Ambedkarism could serve as a nuanced critical framework for analyzing Dalit literature, side by side to Modern and Post-colonial theories. I often imagined Ambedkarism being applied to Dalit texts in the same way Marxism has been used for over a century to examine world literature, exposing the capitalist superstructures that dominate the working class. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's extensive research and lifelong commitment to the annihilation of caste provide a powerful foundation for such an approach. The fusion of Ambedkarite thought with Buddhism, in particular, has given rise to a distinct Dalit aesthetics one that directly challenges both Western and traditional Indian aesthetics, which historically excluded marginalized voices. In recent years, Ambedkarism, alongside postcolonial theories, has emerged as a sharper and more defined critical lens in literary and academic studies.

Although Dr. Ambedkar is frequently cited in discussions of protest literature, Ambedkarism as an explicit literary theory has only recently been articulated. No individual can claim credit for formulating it, since Ambedkar's writings themselves are sufficient to address caste-based realities in the Indian social structure. He already stands as a central figure across genres of Dalit literature, with the Dalit hero often modeled on his vision. Thus, analyzing Dalit works through Ambedkar's philosophical and political framework is not merely appropriate but necessary. Dalit writers themselves have long drawn a boundary against the use of mainstream Indian

aesthetics, which are rooted in religious and orthodox Sanskrit traditions. These traditions, shaped by hierarchical philosophies, often perpetuate discriminatory perspectives against Dalits, making theories like Rasa or other classical critical approaches irrelevant for Dalit texts.

Instead, modern and postcolonial theories provide more fruitful avenues, as they are designed to expose discrimination, marginalization, displacement, and subjugation. Theories that resonate with Ambedkarism, therefore, become especially relevant for analyzing Dalit creative works. This became clear to me while engaging with Loknath Yashwant's translated anthology 'Broken Man' (2018). The title itself, borrowed from Ambedkar's seminal work 'The Untouchables', drew my attention. In the poems, I identified the archetype of the Oppressed and the Oppressor, as well as symbolic references and monuments that could be interpreted through archetypal theory. My address at a symposium on this anthology in Chandrapur (2019), organized with the support of noted Dalit writer Dr. Isadas Bhadke, I delivered my speech centered on the twin frameworks of archetype and political correctness. Later, I developed these reflections into an independent article which is included in this book. Over time, my work also turned toward Dalit aesthetics, with particular attention to the contributions of Dr. Sharankumar Limbale and Omprakash Valmiki, both of whom have written extensively on the subject and significantly shaped the discourse of Dalit Aesthetics. Articles developed on this theme were later presented at international conferences organized by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rashtrapati Niwas, Shimla in 2017 and the Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai, in 2017 and 2018.

When I decided to compile a book on my numerous articles under its present title, I revisited several of my earlier works and revised them thoroughly. To make the present anthology of articles resourceful, I worked upon Dalit Theatre

and Datta Bhagat's celebrated play 'Routes and Escape Routes' separately for over a period of a month. Initially my plan was to write a single article first part would be brief history of Dalit Theatre and second part on 'Routes and escape Routes', but gravity of the writing on historical part forced me to keep it as an independent chapter; this makes it distinct one, yet I have decided to keep it as a separate chapter in this project only. In that study, I employed deconstruction, subaltern studies, feminism, and performance theories. The article expanded far beyond my initial plan, as I was carried away by the play's depth, beauty, and lasting impact since its first staging in 1987.

When I first began this project, I included a short account of Ambedkarism in Part II of the chapter on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the pioneering figure behind Dalit Literature, supposed to be the Chapter I. But soon, I realized I had already explored this theme in one of my earlier books. At the same time, I noticed the current work was steadily moving in the direction of modern literary theory, deeply infused with ideas from the humanities. Just as I was about to complete the manuscript, it became clear to me: the opening chapter needed to be rewritten not as a passing section, but as a dedicated exploration of Ambedkarism itself. The decision was not easy, especially with the project facing repeated delays. In fact, my persistence often tested the patience of my wife and children, as I sat at the table day and night for weeks on end, chasing clarity in my writing. Even through those long hours, my conviction remained firm: the first chapter had to present Ambedkarism as a framework a theory capable of analyzing literature produced from the margins.

Initially, I imagined structuring the chapter in two parts: one focusing on Ambedkar's life, mission, and works, and the other on Dalit literature. But as I immersed myself in the material, new perspectives unfolded. Ambedkarism revealed itself as far more expansive, offering possibilities to engage with literary texts from multiple directions. What began as two

sections grew into four. The first section now traces Ambedkar's life, writings, and his key ideas. The second explores how elements of Ambedkarism have been taken up in Dalit studies, humanities, and literature. The third examines its role in Dalit literature, and the fourth extends the discussion into broader academic and theoretical terrains, highlighting Ambedkarism as a dynamic and ever-evolving intellectual tool.

In the process, I came across stories and movements that were rarely documented. To bring these into the narrative, I turned to voices deeply connected with the Ambedkarite tradition. Ambedkarite thinker Mr. Tarachand Khandekar enlightened me about the Republican Students Movement of the 1960s, the Ambedkar Adhyayan Mandal, and Muktivahini. Playwright Mr. Dadakant Dhanvijay shared insights into present-day theatre and street plays. He also provided me names of a few present day Ambedkarite theatre artists. Theatre personality Sanjay Jiwane helped me understand the evolution of Dalit theatre, while a radio announcer and director-producer of 'Mahanatya Mahanayak Samrat Ashoka' Mr. Ashok Jambhulkar added details about that cultural phenomenon. One of the most memorable contributions came from Ms. Gautami Khobragade-Dongre, President of the Barrister Rajabhau Khobragade Pratishthan. She provided me precious information about her mother late Ms. Hemlata Khobragade, one of the first voices to sing 'Buddha-Bheem Geet' on Akashwani radio in the Nagpur region. Dr. Buddharatna Lihitkar, also helped me develop my insight into development of Contemporary Bheem-Geet and provided me some important inputs.

The final section of the chapter ventures into the theoretical depths of Ambedkarism. It engages with historiography and traces the ever-growing cultural expressions that continue to shape and expand its meaning. What emerged, then, was not just a chapter, but a journey an

unfolding of Ambedkarism as both a philosophy and a method, alive with possibilities for literature and beyond.

In this way, the present book draws upon the foundation of earlier articles, conference presentations, and published research across national and international platforms with few more new added articles suits to the scheme of Modern Critical perspectives. Its primary aim is to examine select Dalit texts within the wider spectrum of modern literary criticism. Certain significant theoretical approaches have not been included here, owing to the limitations set in order to bring this volume to publication at the earliest and invite responses from readers. These approaches, however, remain important, and there is a clear intention to engage with them in future projects.

Nagpur **Dr. Sudesh M. B. Bhowate**

"There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilize the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole."

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, '*Annihilation of Caste*'
(Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1: Page No. 66)

Introduction

Dalit literature, along with Dalit literary criticism and aesthetics, represents not merely a body of creative expression but a revolutionary intellectual and cultural movement. At its core, it emphasizes alternative thought processes and critical methods that foreground Dalit consciousness, identity, and human rights. By doing so, it directly challenges the traditional caste system and resists the dominance of mainstream literary canons and aesthetic frameworks that have historically excluded marginalized voices. Unlike conventional literary traditions that often universalize or obscure social realities, Dalit literature situates itself firmly within lived experiences of oppression, thereby transforming literature into a medium of protest, assertion, and liberation.

The shaping of Dalit literature and its criticism owes much to the vision and philosophy of historical figures such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whose ideas on social justice, equality, and *'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', 'the Annihilation of Caste', 'The Untouchables: Who were they and why they Became Untouchables' Who Were the Shudras?* and *'Revolution and counter Revolution in India'* provided a foundational framework. Similarly, the Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s played a critical role in redefining literature as a weapon of cultural resistance, infusing it with radical energy and political urgency. In this sense, Dalit writing does not view literature as an isolated artistic practice but as an integral part of social struggle, dedicated to reclaiming dignity, asserting agency, and envisioning a casteless society. Scholars and critics of Dalit literature also highlight its interdisciplinary nature, where

history, politics, sociology, and philosophy intersect with literary studies. This interdisciplinarity gives rise to a unique aesthetics an aesthetics of resistance that disrupts the classical models of Indian literary theory, such as Rasa and Dhvani, which often fail to accommodate the experiences of marginalized communities. Instead, Dalit aesthetics insists on a literature that is accountable to lived realities, that names oppression, and that transforms suffering into collective consciousness. In this way, Dalit literature becomes not just an artistic form but also a political and social tool aimed at dismantling systemic hierarchies and fostering an ethical vision of liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice.

In the study and analysis of Dalit literary texts, certain key elements remain indispensable, the foremost among them being '*Dalit Consciousness'* ('Dalit Chetana'). This concept lies at the very heart of Dalit literature, embodying the awakening of the oppressed to their conditions of subjugation and the simultaneous assertion of their dignity and human rights. Critics often examine how this consciousness is articulated in literature, noting its role in nurturing a revolutionary spirit against the caste system.

Sharankumar Limbale, in his seminal work 'Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature', defines Dalit consciousness as a belief rooted in rebellion against caste oppression, with human dignity as its ultimate focus. He makes it clear that Ambedkarite thought is the primary inspiration for this consciousness, awakening the enslaved to their slavery and enabling them to challenge it. Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki, in 'Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra', devotes a separate chapter to Dalit Chetana. He emphasizes that without recognizing India's deeply entrenched social hierarchy, one cannot fully grasp the intensity of Dalit consciousness. For Valmiki, the Dalit, oppressed for centuries, has now awakened to claim his identity. Yet, as he observes, the Dalit's history

offers little ground for affirmation; it is often experienced as a past marked by erasure and degradation "as equal to Hell." Taken together, these perspectives illustrate how Dalit consciousness operates not only as a literary theme but also as a critical framework. It challenges the dominant aesthetics that overlook caste realities and insists on a literature grounded in social truth, resistance, and the assertion of human worth.

Dalit literature, unlike mainstream Indian literature, is grounded in rational philosophy and in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision of a casteless society and the eradication of Dalit suffering. Its purpose is not to provide entertainment but to articulate a revolutionary aesthetics shaped by lived experiences of oppression and resistance. This aesthetics rests on two key elements: rejection and acceptance. Rejection signifies rebellion against unjust social and cultural systems, while acceptance denotes an embrace of rational and scientific philosophies that advocate dignity, welfare, and liberation from slavery. Critics emphasize that the value of Dalit aesthetics lies in its power to subvert traditional literary norms and to create new ones rooted in the principles of human rights, liberty, equality, and fraternity. In this sense, Dalit literature redefines the role of art itself not as detached aesthetic pleasure but as a transformative practice tied to justice and social change. Commentators have also noted a strong parallel between Dalit aesthetics and the Black aesthetics of African American literature, both emerging from histories of systemic oppression and both using literature as a site of resistance, identity formation, and the envisioning of freedom.

Dalit literature often portrays protagonists imbued with Ambedkarite philosophy, striving to reclaim lost identity and to assert human rights. The recurring quest for identity demonstrates how Dalit writing transforms a stigmatized and historically silenced self into a self-defined and empowered voice. In this sense, literature functions as a collective act of

struggle, envisioning a better and more just future. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with identity politics and subaltern studies, which emphasize the importance of marginalized communities articulating their own narratives rather than being spoken for by dominant groups.

A distinctive feature of Dalit literature is its grounding in lived experience. Perhaps for this reason, many Dalit writers have preferred poetry, short stories, essays, and autobiographies over the novel form, which often requires a structural distance from immediate realities. These genres allow a more direct, unmediated articulation of pain, resilience, and resistance. Critics consistently point out that Dalit writers, drawing from their own lived realities of caste-based discrimination and poverty, are uniquely positioned to render these experiences authentically. This authenticity marks a sharp distinction from mainstream literature, where non-Dalit writers have at times attempted to address Dalit issues but often in ways that remain superficial or detached from actual lived experience.

To study and analyze Dalit literature meaningfully, critics have increasingly recognized the need to apply interdisciplinary frameworks and cultural contexts. Modern criticism becomes essential here because it provides the tools to unpack the nuances and complexities of Dalit texts in ways that traditional methods cannot. Postmodern and postcolonial theories, for instance, allow critics to interrogate not only the content of Dalit literature but also the structures of power, representation, and exclusion that have shaped Indian society for centuries. Without such theoretical interventions, Dalit literature risks being read superficially, stripped of its revolutionary edge.

Critics like Baburao Bagul have long emphasized this need. In his article *'Dalit Literature is but Human Literature'*, Bagul argued that the value-orientation of Dalit literature must be understood within the larger current of revolutionary world

literature. He identified three elements viz. democratic socialism, new science & technology, and the revolutionary present as central to Dalit writing. The very inclusion of science and technology highlights the global and modern orientation of Dalit literature, making it clear that its study cannot remain confined to the boundaries of traditional Indian aesthetics. Instead, it calls for critical frameworks that engage with contemporary global thought.

In the introduction to *'Dalit Literature: Nature and Role'*, Prof. Waman Nimbalkar argues that the usual critical standards of mainstream literature cannot be applied to Dalit literature.

> "The followers of traditional literature were not very eager to accept this literature. They prevaricated in acknowledging Ambedkarite litterateurs by applying various yardsticks of literature. Dalit writers, without any botheration, wrote various genres like poems, novels, stories, plays, autobiographies, etc. They rendered all traditional, cateist yardsticks of evaluation of literature useless and outdated. They explained very candidly the nature and role of Dalit literature. In the process, they shed light on its inspiration and scope. They answered multiple qustions posed about Dalit Literature at length and in the process, proved how the stream of Dalit Literature is wider, deeper and better than literature in all other languages."(Ref. to bibliography: Nimbalkar, 2006, 10)

Waman Nimbalkar, in his clear and thoughtful approach, emphasizes that Dalit literature should not be judged through the lens of traditional criticism. Instead, it requires a broader, more modern perspective beginning with the recognition that Dalit literature is unique in its very nature.

Raosaheb Kasabe further reinforced this idea in his essay *'Some Issues before Dalit Literature'*, where he referred to Black writer Léopold Senghor's 1956 address at the Paris conference

of Black African writers. Senghor urged writers to explore the interrelationship between art and life, contrasting African creativity with European traditions. By drawing attention to this speech, Kasabe invited Dalit writers to see the possibilities of interdisciplinary studies and to situate Dalit literature within comparative global contexts. His argument underlines the urgency of critical approaches that move beyond parochial or traditional frameworks, enabling Dalit texts to be understood within broader struggles against racism, colonialism, and oppression.

Sharankumar Limbale, in his influential work 'Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature', made a decisive intervention by outlining two necessary trends: first, that Dalit literature should be evaluated on the basis of universal literary values, and second, that literary standards are never fixed for all time. By rejecting the rigidity of traditional measures, Limbale implicitly called for modern critical approaches capable of evolving alongside literature itself. This recognition that criticism must adapt to historical and social changes resonates strongly with modern critical theory, which foregrounds plurality, resistance, and transformation.

At the heart of modern criticism lies a rejection of the established literary canon. This is precisely where Dalit literature finds its radical potential: in challenging elite historiography, dismantling dominant literary forms, and demanding new approaches that speak to the realities of caste oppression. Dalit writers and critics do not merely add new voices to existing traditions; they fundamentally redefine what literature means, insisting that it confront social evils rather than conceal them under the guise of aesthetics. Modern critical theory, with its emphasis on questioning authority and dismantling hierarchies, thus becomes not just relevant but urgently necessary to Dalit literature. Without it, the

revolutionary spirit of Dalit aesthetics risks being diluted by the very systems it seeks to overthrow.

In his book '*Dalit Literature: Origin and Development*' (Marathi), Dr. Yogendra Meshram dedicates a full chapter to the features of Dalit literature, its sense of beauty, and its critical values. He highlights, "the urgent need for a fresh perspective in understanding and evaluating it. Dalit literature is shaped by social consciousness, a distinct worldview, reflections on social structures, and a strong commitment to social causes. These qualities clearly mark its unique identity and call for deeper research to trace its visions. To truly explore its essence, Dalit literature requires new, life-oriented critical values." (Ref. to Bibliography, Meshram, 1998: 314) Therefore, building a critical framework for Dalit literature demands a modern approach one that first acknowledges its distinct existence and nature, and then develops fair and unbiased measures, rather than relying on traditional literary standards. Dr. Meshram stresses that it is literature that challenges criticism to bring about revolutionary change, not the other way around. Literature initiates transformation, and criticism must adapt to it. This sequence, he argues, is essential and unchangeable.

Dr. Shatrughna Jadhav conducted an independent study on the nature of Dalit Criticism. While explaining the foundation of all criticism, he observed that every literary stream brings with it new forms, fresh experiments, and distinct features. Because of this, criticism plays an essential role in evaluating literature according to its own unique qualities. As literature evolves and reflects transformed perspectives, it requires new methods of assessment, which is precisely the task of criticism. Moving beyond outdated standards, criticism must establish fresh approaches to evaluate, appreciate, research, and examine the values within

literature. (Free translation from Marathi to English, Ref. to the Bibliography, Jadhav, 2003: 53)

It is important to underscore the role of modern and postmodern theories in literary studies in order to highlight their basic approaches and how they may be applied to Dalit literature. Theories such as Ambedkarism, Post-Structuralism, Postcolonialism, Archetypal Criticism, Feminism, Marxism, New Historicism, Psychoanalysis, Subaltern Studies, Political Correctness, Identity Crisis, Performance Theory, and Existentialism all offer powerful tools to expose the hegemonic forces that have shaped Dalits' tormented existence for centuries.

Ambedkarism, grounded in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy of social justice and Thoughts democracy, extends its relevance beyond Dalit literary traditions into the broader domain of literary studies. As a critical framework, it interrogates the structural dynamics of power, hierarchy, and exclusion embedded within cultural production. Its applicability in general literature lies in its capacity to unmask subtle forms of hegemony whether articulated through caste, class, race, gender, or religion while simultaneously foregrounding the ethical imperative of inclusivity. In this sense, Ambedkarism resonates with readings of African American literature, where themes of racial oppression, systemic violence, and the struggle for dignity parallel the caste-based exclusions in India. Similarly, it offers a lens for engaging with the literatures of Indigenous peoples, women, and other marginalized communities, where the negotiation of identity, resistance, and liberation becomes central. By offering a hermeneutics of resistance, Ambedkarism enables scholars to read texts not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as contested sites where marginalities, silences, and emancipatory possibilities emerge. Thus, Ambedkarism functions as a transgressive methodology that reorients literary analysis

towards the pursuit of justice and human dignity across cultural and historical boundaries.

Post-Structuralism, with its rejection of fixed meanings and binaries, enables critics to interrogate caste-based dichotomies such as purity/impurity or upper-caste/lower-caste, revealing them as constructed rather than natural. Postcolonial theory positions Dalit writing as resistance to "internal colonialism" under caste hierarchies, much like struggles against colonial domination, while also raising broader questions of power, representation, and the reclamation of silenced voices. Archetypal Criticism, on the other hand, can trace recurring symbolic structures in Dalit texts such as the archetypes of the Oppressed versus the Oppressor, the "Broken Man," or the journey from darkness to light showing how universal patterns are reworked to narrate specifically caste-based experiences.

Feminist theory plays an essential role in highlighting the "double marginalization" faced by Dalit women, oppressed both by caste and gender. Through women's autobiographies, poetry, and narratives, feminism provides a lens to uncover resistance strategies that mainstream feminist or literary traditions have often overlooked. Marxism complements this by examining intersections of caste and class exploitation, allowing Dalit literature to be read as both protest against economic inequality and a call for solidarity across oppressed groups.

New Historicism situates Dalit texts within their socio-political contexts, such as the Ambedkarite movement, the Dalit Panthers, or constitutional reforms, emphasizing how literature reflects, contests, and even reshapes historical structures of power. Psychoanalysis, meanwhile, enables analysis of trauma, humiliation, and the internalized psyche of oppression found in Dalit autobiographies and poetry, while also revealing the collective unconscious of a community long stigmatized. Similarly, Subaltern Studies validates Dalit

literature as a site where the historically silenced "subaltern" finally speaks, reclaiming both voice and agency.

The lens of Political Correctness focuses on ethical representation, rejecting demeaning or tokenistic portrayals of Dalit lives, and demanding a criticism that remains socially accountable. Theories of Identity Crisis allow for the study of autobiographical narratives where Dalit writers wrestle with fractured selves negotiating caste, class, education, and modernity and illustrate the movement from imposed stigma to self-definition. Performance Theory enriches the study of Dalit theatre, oral traditions, and public protest as acts of resistance, showing how body, voice, and space themselves become instruments of dignity and defiance.

Finally, Existentialism offers yet another dimension by addressing themes of alienation, freedom, authenticity, and revolt. In texts such as Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' or Bama's 'Karukku', we see the Sartrean struggle to assert authentic existence beyond imposed identities, as well as Camus's spirit of revolt against absurdity. Here, Dalit writing transforms suffering into resistance and affirms life through a quest for justice, equality, and human dignity, always grounded in Ambedkarite values.

Together, these theoretical frameworks deepen our understanding of Dalit literature by challenging the limitations of traditional Indian aesthetics and offering fresh paradigms rooted in lived experience, justice, and dignity. However, this does not mean that every theory should be uncritically accepted or mechanically applied to Dalit writing. What remains essential is the guiding influence of Dr. Ambedkar's principles; his rational outlook and scientific approach which provide both clarity and direction in interpretation. Dalit literature itself has consistently reflected on its own nature and role within the Dalit movement, and therefore its central features Dalit consciousness, rejection of oppression, rebellion

against injustice, and the assertion of dignity must always remain at the core of any critical engagement. Equally important is an awareness of the historical roots of each genre within Dalit creative expression, for without situating texts in their cultural and political genealogy, any analysis risks becoming incomplete.

When modern critical theories are applied to Dalit literature, they may sometimes reveal limitations, but such weaknesses usually reflect the constraints of individual writers rather than flaws in the literature itself. What truly emerges from Dalit writing is its transformative power; these texts are not passive cultural artifacts but dynamic sites of resistance, political assertion, and identity formation. The encounter between Dalit literature and contemporary critical theories should therefore be seen not as a dilution of Dalit aesthetics but as a dialogue that strengthens critical engagement, opens pathways for global conversations on marginality and justice, and situates Dalit struggles within broader human concerns. Yet, even as these frameworks expand its horizons, the literature must remain firmly grounded in Ambedkar's emancipatory vision, which ensures that its ultimate aim social transformation, equality, social justice and dignity never gets lost.

One.
Ambedkarism:
A Philosophy of Praxis and Narrative Struggle

I

Ambedkarism today can no longer be seen as a framework confined only to the annihilation of caste. It has transformed into a method of social engagement, a way of addressing not just caste oppression but also political contradictions, economic inequalities, and the larger question of holistic development across all sections of society. In this sense, Ambedkarism should be understood as a living philosophy: an evolving praxis that adapts itself to new contexts of exploitation and injustice while staying rooted in the foundational ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

If we turn to post-Ambedkar Dalit literature, particularly from the 1960s till today, we notice that it became a powerful medium to articulate and expand Ambedkarite thought. Marathi Dalit literature, in particular, emerged as a literary revolution against entrenched caste hierarchies. It not only bore witness to social conflicts but also theorized Ambedkarism through stories, poems, and criticism, turning literature into a political weapon of resistance. This shows us that Ambedkarism is not static; it evolves through cultural and literary movements, carrying forward Ambedkar's philosophy in newer forms of expression.

At the heart of Ambedkar's method was a deep faith in social transformation through organized struggle. His campaigns whether the Mahad Satyagraha, the Kalaram Temple Satyagraha, or his advocacy against the 'Khoti system' of wage-less labor were not isolated protests but part of a larger strategy to force both the colonial state and nationalist leadership to recognize the urgency of Dalit emancipation. Ambedkar consistently tied the question of dignity with that of education and employment. He recognized early on that structural change could not be achieved without breaking caste barriers in access to knowledge, livelihoods, and social mobility.

The roots of this realization lay in his own experience. Coming from a family with a modest foothold in military service (Father Ramaji served as Subhedar in MHOW), Ambedkar witnessed how certain Dalit communities, through military recruitment, had been able to carve out a fragile sense of identity and limited economic stability. Yet even this opportunity was later denied when Post-World War I recruitment of Dalits into the army was halted. Ambedkar was quick to see the contradiction: military service had briefly allowed Dalits to step outside the rigidities of caste, only to be shut off again. For him, this confirmed that education and new forms of employment were indispensable weapons in the struggle against caste hegemony.

His early years as a member of the Bombay Legislative Council, elected in 1925, reveal Ambedkar's sharp focus on policy. He relentlessly pushed for primary education among Dalits, fought for agricultural reforms, and demanded schemes for laborers and the landless. His politics was never abstract: it was grounded in the immediate material needs of the most oppressed. Ambedkar's role in nation-building, especially after his return from America and England, was therefore shaped

not just by constitutional imagination but by his social movements and his political interventions.

Ambedkarism through Dr. Ambedkar's Higher Education (1912-1923 & 1927)

Dr. Ambedkar's higher education in the United States of America and England exposed him to rigorous studies in the Humanities, particularly Economics, Sociology, Politics, and Anthropology. This intellectual training gave him a vantage point from which he could analyze the Indian socio-political system, a system deeply entrenched in orthodox religious philosophies that had systematically overthrown heterodox traditions. This replacement of liberative philosophies with oppressive ones became a key factor in sustaining the graded inequality of Indian society, leaving Dalits marginalized and stripped of dignity. Here lies the Ambedkarite insight: education is not just accumulation of knowledge, but a means to expose the roots of oppression and confront the dogmas that sanctify social slavery. Prior to embarking on his postgraduate studies, Ambedkar completed his B.A. from Elphinstone College (affiliated to the University of Bombay) in 1912, where he studied Political Science, Moral Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, and Economics (Dhananjay Keer, 2009: 28). Even at this stage, his academic choices reveal an orientation towards understanding the interplay of society, economy, and morality subjects that later shaped his struggle for social justice.

Dr. Ambedkar's rigorous research work and his theses for securing degrees such as M.A., Ph.D., M.Sc., and D.Sc. gave him a sound grounding in methodology the science of locating a problem, delving into its causes, and identifying the forces responsible before arriving at conclusions and recommendations. For Ambedkar, research was not an ivory tower exercise but the foundation of praxis; it was the discipline required to diagnose India's ailments and prescribe

remedies for its diseased social order. At Columbia University, he came under the guidance of two professors whose influence was decisive. John Dewey, a towering figure of Pragmatism, shaped Ambedkar's thinking about democracy as a lived experience rather than a mere institutional arrangement. As Dr. Scott Stroud (University of Texas, Austin) records, "Ambedkar, despite an agreement with the Gaekwad to limit himself to economics, enrolled in Dewey's 1914 course Philosophy 231: Psychological Ethics" (Stroud, 2024: 64). Ambedkar's engagement with Dewey's thought became a lifelong intellectual resource, one that equipped him to argue for democracy in India not just as a political system but as a mode of associated living. This was Ambedkarism in formation democracy as a method of annihilating caste. Similarly, Dhananjay Keer notes Ambedkar's admiration for the U.S. Constitution and the life of Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute for the education of Negroes. Just as Washington built institutions to uplift African Americans, Dr. Ambedkar, in his political career, became an uncompromising champion of education for Dalits. His first organization, 'the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha', carried this mission forward. Later, he established schools, hostels, and higher educational institutions such as 'Milind Mahavidyalaya' in Aurangabad and 'Siddharth Mahavidyalaya' in Bombay. This parallel with Washington demonstrates the Ambedkarite conviction: that the oppressed must build their own centers of learning to reclaim self-respect and collective strength.

Ambedkar's other mentor at Columbia, Professor Edwin R.A. Seligman an authority on public finance remained a lifelong friend and admirer, as Ambedkar himself acknowledged in his 1930 address. Seligman's guidance deepened Ambedkar's interest in public finance, a field he not only studied but also later taught in Mumbai. His first major thesis, "*Ancient Indian Commerce*" (1915), submitted for his M.A. in Economics, examined India's trade, coinage, and economic

history, uncovering how religion, caste, and politics strangled commerce. Here, even in his earliest academic work, Ambedkar pinpointed caste as an economic handicap, not merely a social problem a diagnosis that strikes at the core of Brahmanical dominance. His second M.A. thesis, *"National Dividend of India: A Historic and Analytical Study*" (1916), analyzed national income and distribution through historical methods. In it, Ambedkar argued for redistributive justice and denounced the exploitative nature of India's colonial economy. By this point, Ambedkar had already marked himself as an economist of formidable stature, prepared to merge scholarship with statesmanship. His research essay *"Administration and Finance of the East India Company"* (1916) further exposed how the fiscal policies of the Company shaped colonial governance and overburdened Indian society (Ref. to Writings and Speeches, Vol. 6). Ambedkar's intellectual journey was not merely about personal achievement but about arming himself with tools to dismantle oppressive structures. This is the essence of Ambedkarism: knowledge as weapon, education as liberation, and research as revolution.

During his studies at Columbia University, Dr. Ambedkar participated in the Anthropology Seminar of Dr. Goldenweiser in May 1916, where he presented a groundbreaking paper entitled *"Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development."* This paper remains one of the earliest academic attempts to decode the caste system from within, not through the gaze of foreign scholars but through the lived experience of one who bore its chains. The paper demonstrated Ambedkar's profound understanding of the caste system, its root causes, and its persistence through the rigid compartments in which Indian society had been organized for centuries. Unlike superficial descriptions that viewed caste as merely a form of racial difference or occupational division, Ambedkar penetrated to its core, exposing caste as a deliberate mechanism of social control.

From the very beginning, Ambedkar criticized the foreign scholarship of his time for failing to grasp the essence of caste. He pointed out that scholars outside India either dismissed caste as a primitive survival of tribal divisions or explained it in terms of professions and races. Such interpretations, Ambedkar argued, were blind to the social psychology of caste. The real cause was not race, not occupation, but the sanctification of hereditary status. He identified that the true mechanism of caste lay in attaching social identity to birth within strict hereditary boundaries, ensuring that hierarchy could never be escaped. Here lies Ambedkarism: the courage to reject distorted narratives imposed by outsiders and to assert that truth must be spoken from the standpoint of the oppressed.

Dr. Ambedkar further argued that caste is not simply a matter of differences but a system of enforced inequality. It is a social phenomenon that thrives on the notions of ceremonial purity and pollution, dividing human beings into superior and inferior categories on the basis of birth. By exposing the role of ritual and religious sanction in maintaining this hierarchy, Ambedkar showed that caste was not a natural order but an artificial construction; a weapon forged to perpetuate dominance. His analysis revealed caste as an institution of social division deliberately designed to crush fraternity and solidarity, making inequality appear eternal and sacred.

Through this early research, Ambedkar advanced a call that resonates with Ambedkarism: the need for a deeper, scientific, and courageous understanding of caste to address the real problems of inequality. His 1916 paper was more than an academic exercise; it was the first intellectual strike against a system that enslaved millions. It demonstrated the method that would define his life's work dissecting oppression with the blade of reason, rejecting myths that sustained exploitation,

and laying the foundation for a new social order rooted in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Dr. Ambedkar submitted his thesis for the Ph.D. degree at Columbia University, titled "The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India." The timeline of its submission and award (submitted in 1917 and awarded in 1927? It has been a point of confusion, as different sources record it differently). Yet beyond the dates, what stands out is the substance of his work an in-depth analysis of the financial structure of British India. The thesis traced the historical transition from centralized financial control to the increasing autonomy of provinces, showing how constitutional and administrative reforms gradually shaped the final structure of provincial finance. For Ambedkar, this was not just a study of fiscal systems; it was a deeper exploration of how governance, economy, and society were interwoven in colonial India.

In this research, Ambedkar naturally examined the association between caste-based society and economic disparities. He identified how the caste system affected matters such as land distribution, agricultural labor, and resource allocation within British India. This was a profound Ambedkarite insight: caste was not merely a ritualistic or social hierarchy it was the very axis on which economic exploitation revolved. To ignore caste in economics was, in Ambedkar's reasoning, to misdiagnose India's poverty. Thus, even in a thesis on provincial finance, he revealed how Brahmanism had infiltrated the economic order, ensuring that wealth and land flowed upwards while labor and deprivation were reserved for the oppressed castes.

The thesis also advanced major recommendations, particularly advocating for industrialization and for shifting labor from agriculture to non-agricultural channels. Ambedkar observed that agrarian dependency kept the lower classes shackled in exploitative structures sanctified by caste

traditions. This call for industrialization was not a blind imitation of Western economic models, but an Ambedkarite demand for structural transformation to dismantle the bondage of caste-locked agrarian life and open avenues for social mobility. Here lies the radical core of his vision: without economic restructuring, the annihilation of caste would remain incomplete. Reflecting on the thesis, P. Abraham noted: "Taking into consideration the size and severity of poverty in India, unequal access of various socio-economic groups to production resources and resulting highly unequal distribution of gains of economic growth, the burden of structural adjustment of the Indian economy due to reforms has been mainly falling on the poor" (Abraham, 2002: 22). This observation echoes Ambedkar's foresight. He had already anticipated that reforms without social justice would only deepen inequalities, with the heaviest costs borne by the marginalized. Ambedkarism, therefore, demands that economic reform must be tied to social emancipation, otherwise the cycle of exploitation only shifts shape without breaking its essence.

Dr. Ambedkar joined the London School of Economics for his M.Sc. degree, where he submitted his thesis entitled *"Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance in British India"* (1921). The thesis analyzed the stages of decentralization within the framework of colonial finance, while also advancing recommendations that revealed Ambedkar's ethos of social justice. He argued for diverting funds away from defense toward education, public health, and progressive taxation. These proposals, radical for their time, were rooted in Ambedkar's belief that the true measure of a state lies not in its military expenditure but in its investment in human welfare. The thesis also gained significance as it connected directly with the enactment of *the Reforms Act of 1919*, which marks the beginning of the modern history of public finance in India. Ambedkar here was not simply a student of finance but a

visionary economist who understood that budgets were moral documents reflections of whose lives were valued and whose suffering was ignored.

Immediately after earning his M.Sc., Ambedkar embarked on another doctoral program, the D. Sc., and in 1923 submitted his thesis entitled *"The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution."* This thesis brought him into sharp confrontation with the British establishment. As recorded by Dhananjay Keer, "…in march 1923 he was called back to London by his Professor Edwin Cannan as the terse exposition in his thesis had given offense to the British imperialist examiners who asked him to rewrite his thesis without changing his conclusion." (Keer, 2009: 49) This moment is emblematic of Ambedkarism: a refusal to dilute truth to please power. Ambedkar's scholarship was not servile; it was a weapon directed against structures of exploitation.

The thesis by Dr. Ambedkar critically examined Indian currency policy under British rule, particularly the manipulation of monetary systems to favor imperial interests. Ambedkar traced the transition of India's currency from the double standard of gold and silver to a silver-based system, showing how the rupee's value was artificially managed through fixed exchange rates designed to benefit British factories and colonial administration. This manipulation led to the devaluation of the rupee, inflation, and the declining standard of living for Indians, as the masses bore the brunt of a debased currency. Ambedkar was not simply analyzing technical economics; he was exposing how colonialism weaponized money to perpetuate subjugation. In doing so, he widened the battlefield of social justice to include the realm of financial policy.

The closing line of his thesis is both prophetic and defiant: "Queer as it may seem, SAFETY LIES IN AN INCONVERTIBLE Rupee with a fixed limit of Issue" (Ref.

to Writings and Speeches, Vol. 6). This was not merely a technical solution but an Ambedkarite assertion that stability for the people must outweigh profit for the rulers. Here, Ambedkarism comes into full view the belief that economic systems must be reconstructed to serve the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, rather than remain instruments of domination for the privileged few.

If we look at the core of all the research documents that Dr. Ambedkar prepared in pursuit of his degrees, what shines through is his unrelenting quest for truth. His studies in economics reveal not only his immense intellectual strength but also his confidence in exposing the imperialist approach of the colonizers toward their subjects in India. Each of his theses, while technical in appearance, naturally led him to a larger investigation: how the caste structure itself was embedded in the economic churnings of Indian society. He discovered that caste not only restricted economic growth but also deepened the degradation of the Dalits, who, under this system, had nearly lost even the recognition of their humanity. This is the essence of Ambedkarism linking the question of economic development inseparably to the annihilation of caste, and showing that no progress is real if millions are denied dignity.

All of Ambedkar's learning in economics and sociology revealed his foresight and clarity of purpose: tackling the central problem of caste. The constitutional provision in 'Article 17', which abolished untouchability, was not a sudden legal achievement but the culmination of a long intellectual and political journey that began with his early research in the United States. His study of society and economy gave him the tools to strike at the root of India's social disease. At the same time, Ambedkar did not blind himself to the broader structures of economic exploitation under colonialism. His theses must also be read as his sustained economic critique of British rule.

In his doctoral thesis, for instance, he boldly challenged British economic orthodoxy and demanded India's monetary autonomy. This was Ambedkar's dual vision: to fight caste oppression within, and to expose economic exploitation from without.

Ambedkar's research method was strikingly objective. He always began by locating the problem, then delved deeply into its root causes, and finally sought remedies that were not utopian but practical. His recommendations were not ignored they had concrete effects. His suggestions influenced the British government to implement reforms, such as the Reform Act of 1919, and later laid the intellectual foundation for the creation of the "Reserve Bank of India", an institution designed, in principle, to stabilize India's economy and support those at the margins. Here, Ambedkarism reveals itself in its full dimension: research not as detached scholarship but as a weapon to secure justice for the oppressed.

His intellectual journey was marked by diversity of interests. From his undergraduate studies, Ambedkar absorbed insights from economics, politics, philosophy, anthropology, history, and sociology. This multi-disciplinary approach gave him a deep understanding of caste and its superstructures, allowing him to analyze it not as a single issue but as a total system of domination. This holistic vision is what distinguishes Ambedkarism: the recognition that social problems are interconnected and must be attacked from multiple directions economic, political, cultural, and legal.

Thus, Ambedkar's higher education produced not only theses that were academically rigorous but also socially transformative. Each of these works reveals the intellectual roots of Ambedkarism, showing how knowledge, when sharpened by the experience of oppression and guided by the goal of liberation, can become a revolutionary force.

Ambedkarism in the 1920s: Consciousness and Mobilization

The 1920s stand out as the decade when Ambedkarism began to take shape as both a philosophy and a movement. During this period, Dr. Ambedkar engaged directly with people through grassroots campaigns, countless meetings, and conferences, creating not only mass awakening but also nurturing a new generation of local leadership across India. His method was clear: to transform individual suffering into collective consciousness and then into organized struggle.

Dr. Ambedkar's political activism can be traced as far back as his appearance before the Southborough Committee on Franchise on 27th January 1919, where he articulated with clarity and force the specific condition of the untouchables in India. In his report, Point No. 22, he explained that the very word "untouchable" symbolized the collective ills and sufferings of these communities. He emphasized that untouchables were deprived of basic civil rights, to the extent that they were not even regarded as citizens. Ambedkar listed no fewer than 'nine fundamental rights' that should ordinarily accrue to any citizen, but which were systematically denied to the untouchables. He argued that while the British government had gradually conceded such rights to its Indian subjects in theory, untouchability placed them far beyond the reach of Dalits in practice. Citizenship, he declared, rests primarily on two pillars: "the right of representation and the right to hold office under the State". Since untouchables were excluded from both, they were denied the very substance of citizenship. Ambedkar therefore concluded that untouchability created a distinct set of interests which only untouchables themselves could represent. To ensure justice, it was necessary not only to grant them representation but also to guarantee it in sufficient numbers so that they could wield real influence and claim redress". (Ref. to Dr. Ambedkar Writing & Speeches Vol 1).

In Point No. 23, Ambedkar pushed the Commission to confront a fundamental question: if the principle of general electorates were extended, would untouchables actually benefit? Here, he explored the psyche of the oppressed and the oppressors, noting that the graded inequality of castes created a peculiar duality. Among the lower orders, it generated reverence for the higher orders, while among the higher orders it bred contempt for the lower. This dual psychology, rooted in theological justifications of hierarchy, meant that untouchables were disadvantaged both from above and below Ambedkar was not merely describing a sociological fact he was revealing how ideology, religion, and psychology combined to ensure the perpetual subordination of Dalits.

In Point No. 24, Ambedkar warned that within a general territorial electorate, untouchables, who had the largest interests at stake, would inevitably become the greatest sufferers. To avoid this injustice, he demanded"special provisions for their adequate representation" (Moon, 2014 Vol 1: 257). This demand was revolutionary, for it introduced the principle that political equality cannot exist without structural safeguards for historically oppressed groups. For Ambedkar, the issue was not charity or benevolence, but the recognition that justice required positive and deliberate institutional mechanisms.

Ambedkar strengthened his case by pointing to the historical irony of British military policy. Citing the Marquis of Tweedledale's note to the Indian Army Commission of 1859, he reminded the Committee that India had been conquered with the help of "low-caste soldiers". Yet after the Mutiny, when the British began recruiting Marathas, the position of these low-caste men deteriorated—not because the Marathas were superior soldiers, but because their "theological bias prevented them from serving under low-caste officers" (Moon, 2014: Vol. 1: 257-258). This, Ambedkar explained, revealed

how caste prejudice, rather than merit or capacity, structured access to positions of honor and authority. He extended this critique beyond the army, demonstrating how Dalits were systematically denied positions in offices, the police force, and even in industrial settings like cotton mills. He also exposed the discriminatory educational policy whereby schools for lower castes might have teachers from the "touchable" communities, but schools for upper castes never employed untouchable teachers. Such examples laid bare the pervasive exclusion that spanned military, administrative, economic, and educational life.

In Point No. 33, Ambedkar condemned the Congress for agreeing to communal reservations for Muslims while leaving Dalits to contest from the general electorate seats they could never realistically win due to entrenched caste prejudice. And in Point No. 41, he concluded with an unequivocal declaration: the "necessity of communal and adequate representation of untouchables was beyond all question" Here, Ambedkar crystallized a central principle: without guaranteed representation, equality before law was a hollow promise.

Ambedkarism in Evidence

From his submissions to the Southborough Committee, several theoretical perspectives emerge that define Ambedkarism. First, Ambedkar redefined 'citizenship' as not just a formal status granted by the state, but a lived reality grounded in the ability to exercise rights. If caste stripped Dalits of the right to representation and office, then they were not citizens in any meaningful sense. Second, he deployed a 'structural analysis of caste', exposing it as a system that combined material exclusion with psychological submission, ensuring that Dalits were doubly oppressed deprived of rights and conditioned into inferiority. Third, Ambedkar asserted the principle of 'political safeguards for the oppressed', anticipating the modern idea of affirmative action: without

deliberate mechanisms of inclusion, historical injustice would only reproduce itself.

Thus, Ambedkar's evidence before the Southborough Committee was not merely a petition for representation but a 'radical theoretical intervention'. He laid down the foundations of his own thoughts in the line we can understand today 'Ambedkarism': the recognition that caste oppression was total political, social, economic, and psychological and that liberation required equally total remedies through constitutional safeguards, social reform, and moral awakening. His stance before the Committee foreshadowed his lifelong struggle, culminating in his role as the architect of the Indian Constitution, where he enshrined equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice as the guiding principles of a new social order.

Dr. Anbedkar's journalism begins with *'Mooknayak'* (1920), which has a great significance in arousing consciousness among his community men. Far from being just a newspaper, it was a revolutionary instrument of social introspection. Its editorials, including the notable 'Manogat', exposed the brutal injustices faced by the untouchables, employing stark metaphors such as Hindu society being "like a multi-storeyed tower without a ladder." '*Mooknayak'* placed education, political participation, and socio-economic equality at the center of Dalit aspirations. More than reporting, it cultivated what what we call it today as 'Dalit consciousness' the realization that oppression was not natural but unjust. This intellectual groundwork soon translated into political organization with the founding of the 'Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha' in 1924, whose motto 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' became the rallying cry of Ambedkarism.

By the mid-decade, '*Bahishkrit Bharat'* (1927) became the next vehicle of this awakening. It gave the marginalized a powerful platform to voice grievances, assert dignity, and demand rights. It consistently attacked caste-based

discrimination, especially in areas like access to water, temple entry, and education. Ambedkar exposed the irony of Dalits being called Hindus yet denied God, dignity, and public rights. 'Bahishkrit Bharat' thus became both a political weapon and a literary laboratory, publishing essays, letters, and editorials that brought Dalit suffering into public debate while simultaneously laying the foundations of a new literary tradition.

The radical climax of the decade came with the 'Mahad Satyagraha (1927)'. By asserting Dalits' right to drink water from a public tank and later burning the 'Manusmriti', Ambedkar directly confronted the religious and social texts that sanctified untouchability. These events not only marked a turning point in Dalit mass movements but also provided rich material for later Dalit literature short stories, plays, and poems that carried forward the memory of struggle.

Towards the close of the 1920s, Ambedkar moved further into the political arena. His testimony before the *'Simon Commission (1928)*', at a time when Congress leaders boycotted it, represented the Dalits' entry into constitutional politics. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates, educational safeguards, and economic protections for the Depressed Classes demands he would carry forward into the Round Table Conferences and ultimately into the confrontation with Mahatma Gandhi in the Poona Pact. At the same time, he launched *'Samata'* (1929), a new periodical that expanded his focus to include labor rights, agricultural reforms, and legal measures against caste oppression.

Taken together, the 1920s reveal Ambedkarism as more than a struggle against untouchability: it was the birth of a method of social transformation. Through journalism, organizations, Satyagrahas, and constitutional politics, Ambedkar forged a new political consciousness anchored in education, dignity, and self-respect, yet radical enough to

challenge both colonial rulers and nationalist leaders. This was the churning that turned individual pain into collective philosophy, and collective philosophy into a living movement.

Ambedkarism in the 1930s: Radical Assertion

The 1930s mark a decisive phase in the evolution of Ambedkarism. If the 1920s were about cultivating Dalit consciousness through journalism and grassroots mobilization, the 1930s were the decade of radical assertion, when Dr. B.R. Ambedkar not only challenged Hindu orthodoxy but also redefined Dalit politics as a struggle for an entirely new social order. The decade began with Ambedkar extending his demands before 'the Simon Commission', where he called for separate electorates, educational safeguards, and social protections for the Depressed Classes. While the Commission recognized these demands, the deeper confrontation emerged at the Round Table Conferences of 1930 and 1932.

Here, Ambedkar's differences with the Congress came sharply into focus. Mahatma Gandhi's refusal to accept separate electorates for Dalits culminated in the historic Poona Pact of 1932. Often read as a compromise, the pact can also be reinterpreted as Ambedkar's strategic success: he forced the nationalist movement to confront the Dalit question as integral to India's future. His insistence on separate political rights was not merely about representation; it was a profound critique of a freedom movement that prioritized anti-colonial independence while neglecting social emancipation. In this confrontation, Ambedkarism crystallized as an ideology that placed social justice before mere political freedom.

Ambedkar's activism in the 1930s also deepened Dalit faith in collective power. *'The Kalaram Temple Satyagraha'* at Nashik in 1930 symbolized this new energy. By mobilizing Dalits to demand entry into a Hindu temple, Ambedkar highlighted both their exclusion and their strength in unity. This was not

simply a religious protest; it was a declaration that equality must manifest in every sphere of life, sacred as well as secular.

The radical culmination of this social assertion came at the Yeola Conference in 1935, where Ambedkar famously declared: "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu." With this statement, Ambedkar severed his ties with a religion that denied dignity to Dalits. The declaration ignited national debate, as leaders of multiple faiths approached him, urging conversion to their religions. Yet Ambedkar postponed the decision, focusing first on political campaigns. Still, Yeola symbolized the irreversible rupture with Hinduism and opened the door to envisioning a new spiritual and communal foundation for Dalits' dignity and growth.

Ambedkar's next move was to institutionalize Dalit political strength. In 1936, he founded the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a platform that brought Dalits, workers, and peasants into a common fold. With this, Ambedkarism widened its scope beyond caste oppression to embrace class struggles and economic justice. The ILP's success in the 1937 Bombay Presidency elections, where it secured 15 seats, revealed the growing strength of Dalit political consciousness and Ambedkar's ability to transform it into electoral power.

The decade also saw Ambedkar's most uncompromising intellectual statement. In 1936, he wrote the speech 'Annihilation of Caste' for the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, but it was rejected due to its scathing critique of Hinduism. Ambedkar then published it independently, ensuring its message reached the masses. This landmark text rejected the idea of reform within Hinduism and called instead for a complete dismantling of the caste system. It remains the definitive articulation of Ambedkarism's radical core: that social liberation requires a break from oppressive traditions, not accommodation within them.

One more periodical, 'Janata', was established by Dr. Ambedkar in 1930 as the successor of 'Bahishkrit Bharat'. The periodical soon became the principal voice of Ambedkar and the Dalit communities, reporting extensively on their struggles, including the historic Kalaram Satyagraha of 1930, as well as the debates surrounding the Round Table Conferences and *'the Poona Pact'* of 1932. *'Janata'* carried Ambedkar's exhaustive writings on education, caste oppression, and economic justice, reflecting his constant effort to keep his community informed about the shifting political developments in the country. Importantly, *'Janata'* also opened its pages to literary contributions in the form of poems, essays, and letters from Dalits themselves, thus becoming a crucible for the emergence of Dalit literary expression. The special issues of 'Janata' engaged deeply with Ambedkar's differences with Gandhi, especially over the question of separate electorates, allowing Ambedkar to truthfully convey his standpoint to his people across India. In this way, 'Janata' was more than a newspaper; it was a vehicle for Ambedkar to articulate his vision of Dalit rights, social equality, and his trenchant critique of Hindu orthodoxy. Later, 'Janata' also became a medium for spreading the agenda of the Independent Labour Party, which Ambedkar founded in 1936. The paper highlighted not only caste issues but also class issues such as workers' rights, peasants' struggles, and land reforms, demonstrating that Ambedkarism was steadily expanding beyond the critique of caste to embrace a larger framework of economic and class justice. Thus, in the decade of the 1930s, Ambedkarism emerged not merely as a critique of caste oppression but as a blueprint for a new social order grounded in equality, dignity, and collective empowerment.

Ambedkarism from 1939 to 1956: Constitutionalism and Spiritual Revolution

The period from 1939 to 1956 constitutes perhaps the most important and mature phase of Ambedkar's life, when his thought and activism attained their fullest shape. This is the final arc of Ambedkarism, when his role as a statesman, lawmaker, intellectual, and spiritual reformer converged into a single unified philosophy. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 brought Ambedkar's sharp critiques of both British colonialism and Congress nationalism into focus. During this time, Ambedkar authored two of his most important political works. *'Pakistan or Partition of India'* (first published as '*Thoughts on Pakistan'* in 1940, later expanded in 1945) analyzed the Hindu–Muslim conflict with penetrating clarity. Ambedkar did not write this merely as an academic exercise but as a warning against the dangers of majoritarian nationalism, insisting that a democratic nation could not be built by ignoring its minorities. Similarly, in *'What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables'* (1945), Ambedkar issued a severe critique of the nationalist leadership for consistently neglecting the cause of Dalits. Taken together, these works represent Ambedkarism as a radical political philosophy that insists that freedom must never come at the cost of the marginalized.

Between 1942 and 1946, Ambedkar served as Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council, a tenure that marked his first direct exercise of state power. Here, he introduced a range of progressive labour and welfare reforms: reducing working hours, introducing paid leave and maternity leave, providing for workers' welfare in both public and private sectors, and laying the groundwork for industrialization and planned economic development. Ambedkar's policies as Labour Minister reveal his conviction that the state has a direct responsibility for economic and social justice. When viewed

through the lens of Ambedkarism, these reforms illustrate how caste emancipation is inseparable from economic democracy, and that liberation must be as much about material well-being as about social dignity.

Ambedkar's major role in nation-building came with his central involvement in the framing of the Indian Constitution between 1946 and 1950. Though initially defeated in Bombay, Ambedkar was elected to the Constituent Assembly from Bengal with the support of Jogendranath Mandal. His knowledge, political acumen, and clarity of vision quickly established him as indispensable, leading to his appointment as Chairman of the Drafting Committee. Ambedkar approached this work as a life mission, determined to enshrine justice into the very foundation of independent India. He argued that political democracy must rest on social democracy, rooted in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Through his interventions, the Constitution adopted provisions for federalism, minority safeguards, and institutional checks against the tyranny of the majority. Ambedkar's crowning achievement was to make untouchability illegal through Article 17, a monumental step in embedding social justice into the fabric of Indian democracy. Ambedkarism, in this moment, became not only a critique of oppression but also the architectural blueprint of a democratic republic.

As India's first Law Minister between 1947 and 1951, Ambedkar sought to carry his philosophy into the realm of social reform. His most significant initiative was the 'Hindu Code Bill', which aimed to provide women with equal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. For its time, this was nothing less than revolutionary. But the bill faced intense opposition from conservative members of the Constituent Assembly, and it's stalling deeply frustrated Ambedkar. Out of principle, he resigned in 1951, refusing to remain in office when fundamental reforms were denied. This act

demonstrated Ambedkarism in its purest form: a refusal to value political office over social justice, and a radical insistence that democracy without gender equality and the dismantling of caste patriarchy remains incomplete.

This period also witnessed the publication of some of Ambedkar's most important books that continue to shape Indian thought. In '*Who Were the Shudras*?' (1946), Ambedkar challenged the orthodox idea that Shudras were inherently low-born, arguing instead that they were originally Aryan kings who fell from power due to conflicts with Brahmins. By reframing history, Ambedkar showed that caste was not divinely ordained but a product of social and political struggles. In *'The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables' (1948)*, he traced the origins of untouchability to social practices, particularly the abandonment of beef-eating by upper castes while certain communities continued it. Here Ambedkar advanced his "theory of the Broken Man," arguing that untouchables were displaced and isolated communities, later forced into degraded status. In 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India', Ambedkar framed Buddhism as the great social revolution of Indian history, a revolution that was suppressed by the Brahmanical counter-revolution following the fall of the last Mauryas. This work reimagined Indian history as a long battle between forces of equality and counter-forces of hierarchy. In *'States and Minorities'* (1947), Ambedkar offered a bold vision of state socialism, proposing constitutional guarantees of economic rights as essential to democracy. Finally, *'The Buddha and His Dhamma'* (published posthumously in 1957) served as the spiritual manifesto of Ambedkarism. Here he reinterpreted Buddhism as Navayana (the New Way), distinct from Theravada and Mahayana traditions, presenting it as a rational, egalitarian, and ethical system for a new society. Although he acknowledged its proximity to Theravada, Ambedkar's Navayana recast Buddhism in the language of modern equality and democracy.

Collectively, these works illustrate Ambedkarism as both a historical critique of caste and a constructive philosophy of equality, drawing from Buddhism as a universal framework of justice.

The culminating act of Ambedkar's life came in 1956 with his embrace of Buddhism. On October 14, at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur, Ambedkar and nearly six Lac followers converted to Buddhism, fulfilling the promise he had made at Yeola in 1935. Ambedkar framed this conversion not merely as a change of faith but as the final stage in his ideological journey. For him, Buddhism represented a spiritual revolution, completing the political and social struggle he had waged all his life. In his speeches and in *'The Buddha and His Dhamma'*, Ambedkar presented Buddhism as a religion of social democracy, where liberty, equality, and fraternity were central values. By rejecting caste Hinduism and embracing a rational, ethical, and egalitarian religion, Ambedkar gave Dalits a new collective identity, rooted not in oppression but in dignity.

II

Elements of Ambedkarism in Dalit Studies

To journey through the life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is to witness the unfolding of a mission larger than an individual an unbroken struggle for liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice. His works and movements are not confined to his lifetime; they have become living values, inherited and carried forward in post-Ambedkar activism, movements, and literature. To trace these elements, one must plunge into the vast ocean of his writings and speeches, where every thesis, every argument, and every act of defiance was a step in preparing the ground for social revolution.

From his rigorous academic research; each thesis dissecting the roots of social and economic oppression to his mass awakenings that sparked '*Dalit Chetana'* among his brethren; from his experiments with collective action to his radical declaration of breaking ties with Hinduism; from the fruits of collective struggle that elevated him to the positions of Labour Member in the Viceroy's Cabinet and Law Minister of independent India, to his final embrace of Buddhism which completed the circle begun with his quest for the annihilation of caste Ambedkar's journey was both deeply personal and profoundly universal.

His vision of '*Prabuddha Bharat'* was a call for an awakened India, where all backward and oppressed communities could forge their identity with dignity and participate equally in the nation's progress. The quest of Dalit literature, erupting like a volcano of rejection and rebellion in poetry and prose, did not summon a red revolution of bloodshed but a "blue revolution of transformation". For Ambedkar's movement, which culminated in Buddhism, admitted no place for violence. It was a revolution of the mind, of values, of human dignity. To understand this philosophy upheld and expanded in the post-Ambedkar era through movements and especially through literature is to recognize how creative expression became the medium of liberation. Dalit poetry, short stories, plays, novels, and autobiographies carry forward the pulse of Ambedkarism. They rescue the "last man" at the grassroots, amplify the silenced, and weave into art the very elements at the core of Ambedkar's thought. These recurrent patterns across Dalit literature are not merely artistic they are the 'living outcome of Ambedkar's movement', echoing his mission in new forms and voices.

1. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity & Social Justice

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's movement for Dalit emancipation was founded on the universal human values of "Liberty,

Equality, Fraternity, and Social Justice". His own childhood experiences of caste discrimination, where he was denied even the basic dignity of being treated as human, created in him a lifelong resolve to fight for the freedom of his community from age-old slavery. Later, his exposure to the democratic environment of England and America societies where he was treated with equality and respect confirmed his belief that emancipation was possible. In the United States, the progress of Black people through institutions like Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute offered him a living example of how oppressed communities could organize, educate, and build movements for their own freedom. These encounters strengthened his conviction that education and self-organization were the primary tools of liberation.

One of the most defining moments of Ambedkar's mass movement came through the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, where he mobilized Dalits to assert their right to draw water from the Chavdar Tank. In this movement, Ambedkar inspired his followers with the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, declaring:

> "The present caste-system with its invidious distinction and unjust dispensations is one of the greatest sources of our communal and national weakness. Our movement stands for strength and solidarity; for equality, liberty and fraternity. We wish to carry on our movement as peaceful as we can. However, our determination to remain non-violent will to a large extent depend upon the attitude of our opponents. We are not the aggressors and our oppressors for generations should accuse us of aggression a strange thing. We refuse to be controlled and bound by the 'Shastras' and 'Smrities' composed in the dark ages and base our claims on justice and humanity." (Narake, 2019 Vol I: 24)

The unique feature of the Mahad Satyagraha was the unity it generated among Dalits, transforming in a short span of time into a mass agitation. This movement provided the foundation upon which Ambedkar later built his political base to secure representation for his people in governance. His methods demonstrated that liberty, equality, and fraternity were not abstract ideals but practical tools for social and political struggle.

Ambedkar never lost sight of the transformative power of knowledge. In his message to 'The Maratha First Annual Journal' (30th July 1944), he reiterated: "I have always held that knowledge is power in every field of life. The Scheduled Castes will not attain their goal of freedom and liberty until they drink deep of all knowledge." (Moon, 2019, Vol II: 24) Ambedkar's reflections on religion also reveal the centrality of these ideals. In his essay *'Buddha and the Future of His Religion'*, he wrote: "That religion as a code of social morality, must also stand together another test. It is not enough for religion to consist of a moral code, but its moral code must recognise the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognises these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed." (Moon, 2019, Vol II: 104)

This philosophical foundation shaped even his political vision. When he prepared the constitution of the Republican Party of India, which was launched by his followers in 1957 after his untimely death, its objectives included: "It will insist on the maintenance of liberty, equality and fraternity and will strive for redemption from oppression and exploitation of man by man, of class by class and of nation by nation." (Moon, 2019, Vol II: 157) Addressing the All India Scheduled Caste Federation during a Satyagraha in Pune, Ambedkar issued a stark warning: independence might not automatically mean freedom. "Independence might not necessarily mean freedom and liberty for all. The power might pass in the hands of a small

junta who might subject the masses to a greater harassment than they had experienced before." (Moon, 2019, Vol I: 248) His 1954 interview on All-India Radio, named as '*My Philosophy of Life'*, clarified once again that these ideals were not borrowed from the French Revolution but drawn from Buddhism: "Positively, my Social Philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha." (Narake, 2020: 503)

Dr. Ambedkar's activism was not fragmented but deeply rooted in a unifying philosophy, derived from the values of liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice. These were not abstract slogans but guiding principles tested in every sphere: in his social struggles like Mahad, in his writings where he critiqued religion and economics, in his political campaigns for representation, and finally in the Constitution of India where these values were institutionalized in the 'Preamble'.

Ambedkarism, therefore, is the doctrine that liberation requires a restructuring of society based on 'dignity, rights, and solidarity. By grounding liberty, equality, and fraternity not in political science but in a spiritual and ethical framework inspired by Buddhism, Ambedkar ensured that these values were not merely constitutional provisions but 'a way of life'. His vision thus extended beyond the political state into the moral and social fabric of the nation making Ambedkarism both an emancipatory philosophy and a practical program for human freedom.

2. Self-Dignity/Respect, Self-Reliance, Self-Development

The forging of identity has always been a central theme in the Dalit literary movement. Autobiographies, short stories,

and novels emerging from this tradition repeatedly return to the journey of "being to becoming" a narrative deeply rooted in the vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. These stories are not isolated acts of resistance; they are reflections of Ambedkar's call for dignity and progress. His influence lay not only in his ideas but also in his lived example: pursuing higher education, creating professional opportunities, and encouraging Dalits to break free from caste oppression through knowledge, work, and enterprise.

Ambedkar understood that liberation could not be secured without dismantling exploitative systems. His fight against oppressive agrarian practices like 'Khoti' and unpaid labor exposed how landlessness bound Dalits to generational servitude. Through legal reforms, he sought to restore to marginalized peasants the right to own the land they cultivated. For Ambedkar, such reforms were not just economic; they were a step toward restoring 'self-respect'. He was clear: only education, industrial employment, and access to professions could grant Dalits self-dignity, self-reliance, and self-development.

His engagement with the Southborough and Simon Commissions underscored this vision. By emphasizing industrialization over an agriculture-dominated economy, Ambedkar highlighted how caste slavery thrived in villages. A shift to modern industries, he believed, would weaken caste hierarchies and open doors for Dalit empowerment. Thus, at its core, Ambedkar's movement was anchored in the pursuit of dignity through knowledge and independence through economic self-sufficiency.

This philosophy came alive in the "Mahad Satyagraha of 1927", where Ambedkar urged Dalits to shed their ingrained sense of inferiority. Collective struggle, he reminded them, was the key to claiming rights and building confidence. His words "We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain

our self-respect, and gain self-knowledge" remain a clarion call for self-dignity. In the same spirit, he envisioned community centers where Dalits could gain practical skills, aiming to raise ₹3, 25,000/- to establish such institutions. Even though Dalits themselves could not generate this sum, Ambedkar appealed to princely states and progressive Indians, framing his appeal as both a moral duty and a national responsibility.

In his message to rulers and citizens, he acknowledged the stirring of self-respect among untouchables and urged others to support this awakening: "I am sure there is in them a more acute sense of righteous indignation against the inequities heaped upon the Untouchables and a keener desire to give them the means to enable them to overcome these inequities." His assurance was both political and spiritual he wanted India's elite to recognize that Dalits were no longer passive victims but active seekers of dignity.

Ambedkar's conviction was that a genuine revolution had begun: "The message of self-reliance has reached even the lowest strata… the sleepy hollows where once rank superstition, utter self-debasement and abysmal ignorance reigned are now throbbing with new life." This awakening, he argued, if nurtured, could become a transformative force not just for Dalits but for India as a whole. Ambedkarism is, at its heart, the philosophy of rising from imposed humiliation toward chosen dignity. It is not charity that liberates, but 'self-dignity through education, self-reliance through economic independence, and self-development through collective struggle.' Ambedkar's vision remains a living reminder that true social transformation begins when the oppressed cease to see themselves as victims and instead claim their rightful space as makers of history.

3. The Trident of Ambedkarism: Educate, Agitate, Organize

The trident of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy for Dalit emancipation was his immortal call to "Educate, Agitate, and Organize." This philosophy was not merely rhetorical; it became the guiding method of emancipation, influencing masses for nearly a century and transforming Dalit lives. By adopting this mantra, generations of Dalits achieved higher rates of education and employment, and forged a collective identity grounded in self-dignity rather than imposed inferiority. For the poorest of the poor, Ambedkar's trident was not a lofty slogan but a practical rescue method; a way to overcome caste-based humiliation and to challenge the unjust social hierarchy. This triad worked simultaneously at two levels: as a pathway for 'individual empowerment' through education, and as a strategy for 'collective assertion' through organized agitation. Ambedkar himself embodied this method, using his multiple degrees from world-class institutions to wage an intellectual battle against Brahmanical domination. His example taught Dalits that 'knowledge was power' and that constitutional rights would only be secured by challenging entrenched systems of exclusion.

This first stage of Ambedkarism establishes that liberation requires the breaking of mental shackles. Education dismantles ignorance, agitation disrupts passivity, and organization prevents isolation. It is a holistic doctrine that strikes simultaneously at personal and collective levels, enabling the oppressed to reclaim both selfhood and solidarity. Dr. Ambedkar decided to Institutionalizing the Movement by organizing his people for larger programmes for his community. By 1923, Dr. Ambedkar had already earned his doctoral degrees from both the United States and England, and yet his activism had begun even earlier; most notably in 1919 with his evidence before the 'Southborough Commission', and

in 1920 through his periodical 'Muknayak'. These early interventions revealed his dual strategy: using knowledge to confront state power and using print to awaken social consciousness. But Ambedkar soon realized that education alone was not enough; 'masses had to be mobilized into an organized force.' This realization led to the founding of the *"Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha"* on 9th March 1924. Having returned from abroad with unmatched academic credentials, Ambedkar was instantly recognized as a genuine emancipator. Support poured in from Dalit communities across regions. The Sabha's motto—"Educate, Agitate, Organize"was unanimously adopted. Its activities combined 'mass agitation' with 'practical reforms', such as starting schools and hostels. Historic campaigns like the *'Mahad Satyagraha* (1927)' and *'Kalaram Satyagraha'* (1930) were born out of this organizational framework. Ambedkarism here takes institutional form. The trident is no longer just an individual ethic but a 'collective program', translated into organizations, satyagrahas, and alternative institutions of education. Ambedkar demonstrated that emancipation could not rest on appeals to morality it required structures capable of uniting people for sustained struggles.

Dr. Ambedkar's further approach was to engage his people From Organizations to Political Force for their participations in public governance to achieve effective positions to be used for public good. Every campaign, every association, and every new phase of Ambedkar's movement bore the imprint of the trident. His philosophy of 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' reappeared with renewed force in the 1940s. Under his leadership, a meeting held between 17th–20th July 1942 passed a resolution to form a new political party—the "All India Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF)". Its constitution, published in January 1955, enshrined Ambedkar's method in its very first objective: "To organize the Scheduled Castes of India, to educate them and to agitate for their social, economic

and political freedom and to make them strive for their wellbeing and advancement." (Moon, 2019: 457) The SCF represented the culmination of Ambedkar's vision: the transformation of the trident into a "political weapon" for collective emancipation. From Mahad to the Federation, the recurring presence of the trident shows how Ambedkar ensured continuity in the movement, adapting strategies to new contexts while staying rooted in his foundational philosophy. This stage of Ambedkarism shows how the trident evolved from a slogan into a "political doctrine", capable of shaping party constitutions and electoral struggles. It reflects Ambedkar's recognition that social revolution must ultimately find political expression if it is to translate into lasting rights and protections.

The trident of 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' is not just a strategy of Ambedkar's time but a timeless philosophy an ethical, social, and political method that continues to inspire post-Ambedkar activism. It embodies the essence of Ambedkarism. From schools and hostels to Satyagrahas and political parties, every dimension of Ambedkar's work carried the imprint of this philosophy. Its endurance across generations demonstrates that Ambedkarism is not merely a body of thought but a living movement resilient, adaptable, and eternally relevant for the struggle against injustice.

To understand the effective use of Ambedkar's trident: Educate, Agitate, Organize; Datta Bhagat's celebrated play *'Routes and Escape Routes'* (*Wata Palwata*) offers a compelling example. The play dramatizes how the absence of balance among these three elements can lead to failure in Dalit emancipation. The two central characters, Professor Satish and Arjun, represent two distinct but incomplete approaches to leadership within the oppressed community. Satish is highly educated, foresighted, and visionary. His plans; such as providing lawful housing to flood victims reflect the

intellectual grounding that comes with education and his foresightedness about the possible riots and cautioned the Arjun shows his mature understanding of Ambedkarism. Yet Satish is distanced from the grassroots and therefore unable to connect his vision to the lived struggles of his people. His brilliance remains underutilized because it lacks the force of organization and the energy of agitation.

Arjun, on the other hand, is the opposite. He is vibrant, deeply engaged in the local social churnings, and quick to take up causes for his community. But he is still an undergraduate, lacking foresight and vision. Without deeper grounding in Ambedkarism, his activism becomes reactive rather than strategic. Under his leadership, the community is pushed into bloody riots a tragic reminder of what happens when agitation is divorced from education and disciplined organization. The play thus communicates a profound Ambedkarite message: 'the trident must remain whole'. If education, agitation, and organization are not cultivated together, the result will either be sterile intellectualism or chaotic activism. Ambedkar's philosophy demands balance: the educated must remain rooted in the masses; agitators must be guided by vision; organization must harness both knowledge and action.

4. Destruction of Hegemonical Superstructure of Caste

The Ambedkarite movement arose to overcome the stigma of caste and to destroy every shackle of the oppressive superstructure woven around it. The 'methodology to annihilate caste at its roots' can be studied from two of Dr. Ambedkar's foundational texts: his research paper "*Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*," (1916) presented at Columbia University, and his unpublished but later printed speech "*Annihilation of Caste*," (1936) originally prepared for the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal in Lahore.

In '*Caste in India'*, Ambedkar dissected the roots of caste, exposing how the "water-tight compartments" of caste (the mechanism) were sustained through the closing of inter-community communications: 'Roti' (dining) and 'Beti' (marriage). What began as the pursuit of purity of blood under a religious veneer was imitated across communities, halting social interaction and ultimately producing 'untouchability' a system that degraded those at the bottom to subhuman status. Ambedkar also revealed how caste corroded society's moral sense, killing public charity, social responsibility, and reducing the individual into a prisoner of birth (Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1). Whereas, in '*Annihilation of Caste'*, Ambedkar went further, delivering a radical critique of the Hindu religious framework that legitimized caste. He declared that the system disregarded fundamental human values 'liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice' and had transformed into an 'anti-social spirit.' By halting social churning and prohibiting healthy interaction, caste condemned Indian society to stagnation. His call to destroy caste from its very base included concrete suggestions such as inter-caste marriage and unrestricted social interaction to break down its water-tight walls. Together, these two texts mark the theoretical and practical foundation of Ambedkarism. One diagnoses caste as a social mechanism of exclusion, the other prescribes its annihilation as a precondition for democracy.

The inspiration drawn from these epoch-making works became the lifeblood of Dalit literature, which carries Ambedkarism into artistic expression. Its central objective is to campaign for liberty, equality, fraternity, and the annihilation of caste while promoting the socio-economic and cultural growth of the oppressed. Baburao Bagul's "When I Hid My Caste" (Jevha Mi Jat Chorali) portrays the humiliations and survival strategies of a Dalit protagonist who hides his caste to claim dignity. It echoes Ambedkar's insistence that education and assertion are weapons against caste hegemony. Shantabai

Kamble's "Water" (Pani) reflects the denial of basic human rights symbolized by water to Dalits, paralleling the Mahad Satyagraha led by Ambedkar in 1927. It highlights how symbolic struggles become transformative awakenings. Daya Pawar's "*Revolt"* (Vidroh) brings forth a protagonist who refuses submission, embodying '*Dalit Chetana*' the psychological awakening Ambedkarism instilled among the oppressed. Dalit Autobiographies have further expanded this literary tradition: Daya Pawar's '*Baluta*', Sharankumar Limbale's '*The Outcaste'*, Omprakash Valmiki's '*Joothan'*, Vasant Moon's '*Vasti' (Growing Up Untouchables of India)* and Urmila Pawar's '*The Weave of My Life'* and most of the dalit autobiographis across the all languages in India all depict the protagonist's journey to overcome caste, linking individual struggle with collective resistance. These literary texts reveal Ambedkarism in practice. They do not merely describe suffering; they 'transform humiliation into rebellion, silence into voice, and oppression into assertion.' By reworking Ambedkar's theoretical framework into lived experience, Dalit literature continues his emancipatory mission, keeping alive the quest for annihilation of caste.

5. Ambedkarism and Women's Emancipation

Dr. Ambedkar's engagement with women's rights was not peripheral but central to his philosophy of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity'. He consistently argued that caste and patriarchy were intertwined structures of oppression, and therefore women's emancipation was an integral part of the project of social democracy. His contributions spanned legislative advocacy, policy reforms, and grassroots mobilization of women into leadership.

i. Early Legislative Interventions

In the Bombay Legislative Council, Ambedkar opposed laws that discriminated against women in inheritance and

marriage and demanded compulsory primary education for all children. He was unequivocal: "progress of a community is measured by the degree of the progress of women have achieved." This early emphasis reveals a foundational Ambedkarite principle that no liberation of Dalits, or of society at large, was possible without women's equal progress.

On 28 July 1928, while supporting the Maternity Bill, Ambedkar insisted that maternity was a national responsibility and should be supported by the state rather than left to individual women or employers:

"Sir, that it is in the interests of the nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the pre-natal period and also subsequently, and the principle of the bill is based entirely on that principle. That being so, Sir, I am bound to admit that the burden of this ought to be largely borne by the Government… Then, it is said that it is unjust to confine this bill to the Bombay Presidency only and that it ought to be extended to the whole of India." (Moon, 2019 Vol. 2: 166–167)

This reflects Ambedkarism in practice: a recognition that individual rights must be guaranteed by institutional responsibility. For Ambedkar, women's welfare was not charity but a matter of justice and citizenship.

ii. Reproductive Rights and Autonomy

In November 1938, during a debate on birth control in the Bombay Presidency, Ambedkar made a radical intervention in support of women's reproductive autonomy:

> "Whenever a woman is disinclined to bear a child for any reason whatsoever, she must be in a position to prevent conception and bringing forth progeny which should be entirely dependent on the choice of women. Society would in no way profit by the addition of unwanted progeny. Only those children who are welcomed by their parents, can be of social benefit and

> hence every woman must be enabled to resort to prevention of conception quite easily." (Moon, 1919 Vol. 2: 264)

Here Ambedkar articulates a profoundly modern feminist position the right of women to control their own bodies. Ambedkarism thus expands beyond caste critique into a theory of bodily autonomy and social responsibility.

iii. Political Rights and Representation

Ambedkar's vision for women was inseparable from his struggle for democracy. At the *Round Table Conference* in London (1930), he advocated equal voting rights for women:

> "If you understand the franchise in the right sense of the word, then it seems to me the franchise is something which must be regarded as the inherent right of every individual in the State; and if you understand that the franchise is the inherent right of every man or woman who is capable of understanding it, then surely you cannot make an inherent right of a people dependent upon the convenience of your administration." (Moon, 1919 Vol. 2: 559)

He went further, connecting women's rights to the struggle of the Depressed Classes: "Unless I know that every man and every woman in the Depressed Class community will be able to exercise the vote and to determine the destiny of the candidate who is going to represent the mass of people in the country, I certainly am not going to consent to joint electorates; certainly not." (Moon, 1919 Vol. 2: 563) Ambedkar insisted that democracy without women's equal participation was hollow. This reveals Ambedkarism as a philosophy of inclusive democracy, in which marginalized men and women alike must have full political agency.

iv. Labour Welfare and Economic Justice

As Labour Member in the *Viceroy's Council* (1942–46), Ambedkar institutionalized protections for women workers. He introduced maternity benefits, equal pay principles, and workplace protections. He noted with pride: "It is for the first time that I think in any industry the principle has been established of equal pay for equal work irrespective." (Moon, 1919 Vol. 10: 143) He also pushed amendments to the Mines Act and Factory Acts to secure reduced working hours, safety measures, workplace crèches, welfare officers, and inclusion of women in social insurance schemes. Ambedkar's labour reforms show Ambedkarism as a practical programme of economic democracy, recognizing that social freedom must be rooted in economic independence and workplace dignity for women.

v. Women's Leadership in Movements

Ambedkar also recognized the transformative role of women in mass struggles. During the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) and the *Kalaram Temple Satyagraha* (1930), hundreds of women, including Shahumati Bai, took leadership roles. By the 1940s, women's conferences became integral to his movement. At the *All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference* (Nagpur, 1942), Ambedkar proudly declared:

> "Ever since I began to work among the Depressed Classes, I made it a point to carry women along with men. That is why you will see that our Conferences are always mixed Conferences. I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved, and when I see this assembly, I feel both convinced and happy that we have progressed." (Moon, 2019 Vol. 17, part III: 282)

Ambedkarism is not only about laws it is about cultivating social agency and confidence among the oppressed. By

consciously drawing women into leadership, Ambedkar challenged patriarchy both within and outside the Dalit community.

vi. Constitutional and Legal Reforms

As the chief architect of the Constitution, Ambedkar guaranteed women equality before the law, while also allowing for protective provisions: "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children." (Article 15 (3). Fundamental Duties 51A (e) mandated citizens "to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women." Provisions like Article 243(D) ensured one-third reservation for SC/ST women in legislatures, and women's welfare was included in the Eleventh Schedule.

His most ambitious legal project was the 'Hindu Code Bill', which proposed:

1. Equal inheritance rights for daughters.
2. Recognition of divorce and rights to remarriage.
3. Abolition of coparcenary rights that excluded women.
4. Legal monogamy, abolishing polygamy.

Ambedkar resigned from Nehru's Cabinet in 1951 after the Bill was blocked an act of sacrifice for women's rights. The Hindu Code Bill embodied Ambedkarism as social democracy codified into law. It showed his commitment to universal justice, not only for Dalit women but for all women oppressed under patriarchal Hindu laws.

Ambedkar's lifelong advocacy for women reveals the practical force of Ambedkarism a philosophy that transforms principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity into tangible reforms in education, labour rights, reproductive autonomy, political franchise, and family law. Unlike his contemporaries, Ambedkar did not merely glorify women as symbols; he sought

to make them agents of social transformation. His interventions whether in satyagrahas, legislatures, labour laws, or the Constitution show that for Ambedkar, the annihilation of caste and the emancipation of women were inseparable struggles.

6. Dr. Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism: A Rational and Emancipatory Praxis

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 'Navayana Buddhism' is not a mere sectarian development within Buddhism, parallel to Mahayana and Theravada. Rather, it is a 'radically new interpretation of Buddhism'refined, researched, and socially engaged—designed to transform culture through rationalism and a scientific outlook. While Ambedkar acknowledged that Navayana leaned closer to Theravada in form, it was entirely distinct in substance. The idea of Navayana may be traced most clearly to his 'speech of Conversion on 15th October 1956', yet it was rooted in a much longer process that began with his 'Yeola Conference speech on 13th October 1935', where he declared his refusal to die a Hindu. The intervening two decades were spent preparing his people for this religious revolution through writings, speeches, and organized movements.

Ambedkar's speech at Yeola in 1935 came at the end of the five-year Kalaram Temple Entry Satyagraha in Nashik. The brutal resistance from caste Hindus convinced him that Hinduism offered no space for equality. In his first municipal address, he stated:

> "Now we come to the conclusion that there is no change in attitude of the touchables and they are not ready to behave with us, with affection despite of our continuous struggle. As such we have decided to remain separate from Hindus, to live with self-help and struggle to attain self-elevation." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 94)

Later, addressing a crowd of nearly 10,000, he referred to the inhuman treatment during the Kalaram struggle and, "exhorted them to sever their connections with Hinduism and seek solace and self-respect in another religion, but warned them to be very careful in choosing the new faith and to see that equality of treatment, status and opportunities was guaranteed to them unreservedly." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 95) In the very speech, Dr. Ambedkar's declaration was decisive: "Unfortunately I Was Born a Hindu Untouchable but I Will Not Die a Hindu." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 95) He immediately called off the temple entry Satyagraha, signaling a radical rupture with Hinduism. Yeola Conference marks the theoretical beginning of Navayana. Ambedkar here reframed religion as an instrument of equality, dignity, and opportunity a framework Hinduism fundamentally denied.

Over the following years, Ambedkar consistently invoked the theme of religious conversion. On 17th May 1936, he reminded his people: "If you continue to remain within the fold of Hinduism, you cannot attain a status higher than that of a slave." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 107) At Bandra in 1937, he pushed further: "We must give up (observing) all the religious festivals and days which we had been observing according to the Hindu religion. We must consider whether the rites performed according to the Hindu religion are proper from the point of view of religion and morality." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 160) These speeches illustrate Ambedkar's gradual preparation of the masses for conversion. He emphasized that true emancipation required not only rejecting caste but abandoning the entire religious superstructure sustaining it.

i. Defining Navayana:

By the early 1950s, Ambedkar openly began articulating Buddhism as the new faith. In May 1950, he delivered multiple speeches on Buddhism, urging people to examine religion rationally. On 6th June 1950, he argued that Buddhism paved

the way for democracy and a socialist society. By 29th September 1950, he declared: "I shall devote rest of my life to the revival and spread of Buddhism." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 410). In 1953, he warned: "If Buddhist Gospel is not adopted History of conflict in Europe will repeat in Asia." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 493) By 4th December 1954, he unveiled a blueprint for a Buddhist movement in India, announcing his plans for '*The Buddha and His Dhamma*', mass conversions, Buddhist seminaries, Sunday congregations, and Viharas in major Indian cities. Ambedkar positioned Buddhism as both 'a moral religion and a social revolution'. Unlike Marxism, which he criticized for neglecting ethical foundations, Navayana was designed to sustain democracy through fraternity.

ii. The Great Conversion of 1956

On '14th October 1956', at Nagpur's Deekshabhoomi, Ambedkar and nearly six lac followers embraced Buddhism. The hallmark of this conversion was the 22 Vows, where he instructed followers to renounce Hindu gods, Brahmin priests, and all Hindu rituals, while affirming exclusive allegiance to Buddhism. On 15th October, he reflected: "Through a resolution at Yeole in 1935, we started the movement of renouncing the Hindu religion. Long back I had vowed, 'Though I am born as a Hindu I will not die as a Hindu' and I proved it yesterday. I am overjoyed, I am exalted. I feel I have been liberated from the hell." (Narake, 2020, Vol III, 536) He linked Dalit identity with ancient Buddhists like the Nagas, emphasized Buddhism's rationality, and urged followers to dream of higher aspirations for their children. The conversion was not merely a change of faith; it was a 'civilizational rupture', inaugurating a new identity and collective destiny for Dalits, rooted in reason, dignity, and equality.

Dr. Ambedkar was also invited to covert people of Chandrapur region (150 KM from Nagpur) to Buddhism; on the request of Barrister Rajabhau Khobragade the son of

Devaji Khobragade (a local influential) Ambedkarite Politician who was elected on the seat of Labour Party of India in 1937). Accordingly, Dr. Ambedkar reached Chandrapur on 16th October 1956. In the evening at 7.00 Dr. Ambedkar gave Diksha to some three lac people by observing triple refuge, Five Precepts and Twenty Two Vows of Navayana.

Alongside his speeches, Ambedkar left behind two major Buddhist works which one should relate with Dr. Ambedkar's conversion movement:

1. '*The Revolution and Counter-Revolution in India'* where he interpreted Indian history as the'rise of Buddhism' (revolution) and the 'Brahmanical reaction' (counter-revolution).

2. '*The Buddha and His Dhamma'* – his magnum opus, intended as the canonical text of Navayana, written in the style of the Bible, providing both biography and doctrine.

These works gave *Navayana-Buddhism* its intellectual scaffolding. They made Buddhism the philosophy of 'social democracy', distinct from ritualistic religions and rooted in rationalism and equality. Dr. Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism was not simply about adopting a new faith but about 'reconstructing religion itself' as an emancipatory praxis. It severed Dalits from Hinduism's structures of oppression and offered a rational, ethical, and egalitarian alternative. Navayana thus represents the culmination of Ambedkarism: liberty, equality, and fraternity institutionalized in religion, enabling the realization of his dream of '*Prabuddha Bharat'* an enlightened India.

iii. Buddha and Karl Marx: Ambedkar's Post-Conversion Reflections

One of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's most significant post-conversion speeches was delivered on 20th November 1956 in

Kathmandu, Nepal, entitled "*Buddha and Karl Marx*." In this address, Ambedkar compared two of history's greatest figures who sought to reconstruct the world and abolish human suffering. While acknowledging their shared objective, he maintained that Buddha's method was superior to that of Marx.

Ambedkar argued that Buddha's approach to transformation was through the *'Noble Eightfold Path'* a path of self-discipline, ethical conduct, and wisdom. Marx, in contrast, relied on violent revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. For Ambedkar, violence and dictatorship could not provide a sustainable or humane basis for society. He affirmed his faith in 'parliamentary democracy' as a more enduring framework for social change than the authoritarian methods proposed by Marx. This reflects the heart of Ambedkarism an insistence that revolution must remain tethered to moral principles and democratic processes. Unlike Marxism's reliance on coercion, Ambedkar's Navayana embraced persuasion, ethical transformation, and democratic structures.

Ambedkar further pointed out that 'Buddha did not discourage material possessions', but only warned against their misuse, whereas Marx advocated the abolition of private property. Ambedkar interpreted this as a sign of Buddhism's pragmatism: it recognized human needs and sought to regulate desire through morality rather than coercion. Finally, Ambedkar concluded that Buddhism provides a true foundation for 'liberty, equality, and fraternity', whereas Marxian communism, while promising equality, failed to nurture fraternity or protect liberty. Buddha's emphasis was on transforming the 'mindset of individuals' as a more effective and sustainable method for societal change than Marx's reliance on external revolution alone. Here, Dr. Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism over Marxism was not accidental but strategic. He recognized that without an inner revolution of

values, external revolutions risked reproducing domination in new forms. By grounding Navayana in liberty, equality, and fraternity, he ensured that religion itself became a 'moral engine for democracy and social justice.'

III

Ambedkarism in Dalit Literature

Dalit literature emerged as one of the most important cultural spaces where Ambedkarism was not only remembered but also applied and expanded in new directions. The literature that flourished first in Marathi during the 1960s and 1970s, and later in other Indian languages, drew heavily from the life, struggles, and writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's radical insistence that caste is not a natural or divinely ordained order but rather a system of exploitation sustained by social power and religious sanction became a foundational insight for Dalit writers. They used this framework to reinterpret their own lived realities and to narrate experiences of oppression, humiliation, and resistance from below. Through short stories, autobiographies, and poetry, Dalit writers gave literary expression to Ambedkar's central idea that emancipation must come not from divine grace or reformist charity, but from collective consciousness and organized struggle. In this sense, Dalit literature itself became a method of Ambedkarism: a cultural revolution that made the pen an instrument of protest and the page a space for resistance.

Ambedkarism also decisively shaped the aesthetics and politics of Dalit literature. Unlike mainstream literary traditions that often erased or silenced marginalized voices, Dalit literature positioned itself as a literature of protest, memory, and assertion. Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, organize" became a guiding principle for its form as well as its content. Education inspired autobiographies that charted journeys from

exclusion to self-realization. Agitation infused Dalit poetry with anger, urgency, and defiance. Organization produced collective narratives of solidarity, where the Dalit subject was no longer isolated but part of a larger political awakening. Literature here was not an ornament of culture but a continuation of Ambedkarite Satyagraha, carrying forward Ambedkar's conviction that words and ideas are weapons of revolution.

The applicability of Ambedkarism in Dalit literature is particularly visible in how writers framed the body, space, and memory. Ambedkar's critique of untouchability as a system that denied Dalits access to water, land, and sacred space resonates across Dalit stories and poems. Writers recalled these everyday humiliations, not to re-inscribe victimhood but to reveal how oppression was structured into every detail of daily life. At the same time, they portrayed Dalits as agents of change, echoing Ambedkar's vision of dignity and self-respect. Literary representations of the burning of the 'Manusmriti' at Mahad or the 1935 Yeola declaration that Ambedkar would not die a Hindu became recurring motifs of defiance and rupture. These events, carried into the imagination of Dalit literature, became symbols of a wider struggle for liberation, inspiring narratives that questioned orthodoxy and envisioned alternative futures.

Dalit literature also applied Ambedkarism by stretching its reach beyond the theme of caste oppression into interconnected issues of gender, labor, and class. Women writers, drawing from Ambedkar's advocacy of the Hindu Code Bill and his unwavering emphasis on gender equality, wrote about the double burden of caste and patriarchy. Daya Pawar's '*Baluta*' A foundational Marathi life-oriented narrative that turned everyday humiliation into collective memory and political testimony. Baby kamble's '*The Prison We Broke'* is a rare early testimony by a Dalit women that illuminate damestic

patriarchy. Omprakash valmiki's *'Joothan'* is a blunt, literary account of untouchability that maps caste's reach inot food, schooling and dignity. Urmila Pawar's '*The Weave of My Life*' and Baby Kamble's '*The Prisons We Broke'* foreground Dalit women's voices, turning female subjectivity into a site of protest and self-assertion. These works testify that Ambedkarism cannot be realized without confronting patriarchy both inside and outside the Dalit community. Similarly, narratives of workers and peasants in texts like Sharan Kumar Limbale's '*Akkarmashi*' reflect Ambedkar's larger economic vision, where liberation was not complete without labor rights, land reforms, and economic democracy. Laxman Gaikwad's *'Uchalya' (The Branded)* documents the survival strategies of a marginalized community and the politics of social stigma. Vasant Moon's '*Growing up Untouchables in India'* is a personal and historical reflections linking local experiences to Ambedkarite politics. The aautobiography also historically documents the Conversion Movement of Dr. Ambedkar. Namdeo Nimgade's '*In the Tiger's Shadow'* is an Ambedkarite life narrative useful for understanding local leadership and social stigma. And Manoranjan Byapari's '*Interrrogating My Chandal Life'* is a Bengali Dalit autobiography that expands regional and linguistic breadth of Dalit testimony. Dalit Autobiography thus became an evolving canvas of Ambedkarism, continuously applying his ideas to new contexts of injustice.

This literary churning shows that Ambedkarism is not merely a historical memory but an active cultural method of production. Through literature, Ambedkar's ideas have been reimagined, popularized, and radicalized. Stories, poems, and autobiographies became instruments of collective awakening, enabling Dalits to articulate their history, critique social power, and imagine new forms of life. Ambedkarism in Dalit literature works simultaneously as a mirror of historical struggles and a compass pointing toward a future society based on liberty,

equality, and fraternity. Dalit short stories explore the lived experiences, resistances and cultural assertion of India's marginalized Dalit communities. The short stories in Dalit literature, carry themes like caste discriminations, economic inequality and social exclusion. Baburao Bagul's *'Jevha Mi Jat Chorali' (When I Hid My Caste)* broke new ground in Marathi literature by confronting readers with raw political realism. His stories turned short fiction into a powerful tool of protest, exposing caste oppression with unflinching honesty. Arjun Dangle's anthology 'Poisoned Bread' carried forward this legacy, bringing together voices that redefined Dalit writing in Marathi. The collection features landmark works such as Bandhumadhav's *'The Poisoned Bread'*, Waman Howal's *'The Storied House'*, Yogiraj Waghamre's *'Explosion'*, and Dangle's own '*Promotion'*. Stories like Bhimrao Shivrale's *'Livelihood'*, Baburao Bagul's *'Mother'*, Amitabh's '*Cull*', Keshav Meshram's *'Barrier'*, Anna Bhau Sathe's '*Gold from the Grave'*, and Avinash Dolas's '*The Refugee'* further capture the struggle, resilience, and protest of Dalit life. Together, these works not only gave Dalit literature its distinct identity but also challenged the complacency of mainstream Marathi writing.

Dalit literature is unique because it does not restrict itself to narrating caste oppression alone but engages with a wide spectrum of social issues that intersect with caste. These include poverty, labor exploitation, gender inequality, religious exclusion, and the politics of identity. In this sense, Dalit literature is both testimonial and political. It documents lived experiences of marginalization with unflinching honesty, while also proposing pathways of resistance and transformation. The guiding spirit behind this literary tradition is Ambedkarism, which insists that dignity, equality, and justice are inseparable from everyday existence. Marathi Dalit poetry is one of the most powerful voices of resistance in modern Indian literature. Emerging from the lived experiences of caste oppression, it breaks away from traditional forms and themes to speak with

raw honesty and urgency. Poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, and Arun Kamble transformed poetry into a space of protest, dignity, and self-assertion. Their verses do not seek sympathy; instead, they challenge injustice head-on, exposing the brutality of untouchability while celebrating the strength of Dalit identity. With its mix of anger, pain, and hope, Dalit poetry reshaped Marathi literature, turning it into a platform where silenced histories found language and rhythm. Some of the anthology of Dalit poems created a great impact and shows its nature of rejection and protest. Namdeo Dhasal's '*Golpitha'* embodies the Ambedkarite spirit of confronting oppression head-on. His raw urban poetics amplify the collective rage of the streets, transforming poetry into a weapon of resistance against caste and class exploitation. Daya Pawar's '*Kondwada'* channels personal humiliations into a reflective, ethical critique echoing Ambedkar's call for self-respect and dignity as the foundation of liberation. Keshav Meshram's '*Utkhanan'* voices its protest through satire, lament, and aspiration, capturing the Ambedkarite demand for both social justice and intellectual awakening. Yashwant Manohar's '*Utthangumpha*' lays bare the anguish of caste oppression, turning grief into a clarion call for equality and rebellion in the true Ambedkarite tradition of fearless assertion. Waman Nimbalkar's poetry, rooted in the everyday struggles of Dalit life, unflinchingly portrays the resilience of the marginalized. In works like *'Mother'*, he documents the toll of caste and hunger while affirming the dignity and strength of survival, aligning with Ambedkar's emphasis on education and emancipation. Jyoti Lanjewar's *'Red Slogans on the Green Grass'* brings a distinctly Dalit-feminist voice into this discourse her protest poems foreground women's oppression within caste hierarchies, carrying forward Ambedkar's vision of annihilating caste through both social and gender justice.

The caste problem is often explored in Dalit literature through the tangible realities of humiliation and exclusion. In

Daya Pawar's *'Baluta'* (1978), the narrator recounts the indignities faced by Dalits in Bombay's chawls, showing how caste discrimination migrated from rural villages into urban life, shaping housing, work, and everyday interactions. Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki's *'Joothan'* (1997) demonstrates how caste dictates access to food, education, and social participation, exposing the enduring practices of untouchability in modern India. These works do not merely describe suffering; they convert humiliation into collective memory, urging readers to see caste as a structural system that requires annihilation, echoing Ambedkar's own call.

Dalit literature further highlights the intersection of caste and gender, often neglected in mainstream narratives. Writers like Pawar and Kamble expose how Dalit women suffer a dual subjugation oppressed by upper-caste patriarchy and marginalized within their own communities. By placing women's experiences at the center of their narratives, these works extend Ambedkarism into the realm of feminist critique, showing that true social democracy requires dismantling both caste and patriarchy. The question of labor and economic exploitation is another recurring theme. Limbale's *'Akkarmashi'* portrays the precarious lives of Dalit laborers forced into menial work without security or recognition. Such narratives reflect Ambedkar's conviction that caste is not only a religious or cultural problem but also an economic system of control and exclusion. They apply Ambedkar's argument that social emancipation must be accompanied by economic democracy.

Dalit plays emerged as a powerful extension of the Dalit literary movement, using the stage to dramatize the realities of caste oppression and social injustice. Unlike mainstream theatre, which often ignored or distorted Dalit lives, these plays brought the voices of the marginalized to the center. Drawing inspiration from B.R. Ambedkar's vision of equality, they

exposed the brutality of untouchability, the contradictions of religion, and the hypocrisies of a caste-ridden society.

Shantabai Kamble's short story *'Maata'* foregrounds the Dalit mother as a site of resistance, dramatizing the struggle for education as an Ambedkarite act of emancipation against systemic humiliation. Raja Dhale's '*Avadhya*' stages the brutal violence faced by Dalits, but transforms it into a narrative of collective defiance, revealing Ambedkar's conviction that only organized protest can dismantle caste tyranny. Namdeo Dhasal's *'Ek Maat Anek Naam'* exposes the fractures of a society stratified by caste, while simultaneously invoking Ambedkar's call for fraternity as the foundation of a new social order. Narayan Surve's '*Zulta Phul*' uses the metaphor of a swinging bridge to illustrate the precarious balance between oppression and aspiration, echoing Ambedkar's vision of crossing from slavery into liberty through education and struggle. K.B. Kamble's '*Bhimrao Ekach Navasathi'* brings Dr. Ambedkar himself to the stage, not merely as a historical leader but as a living method of resistance and transformation, embodying his continued presence in Dalit consciousness. Premanand Gajvee's *'Ghotbhar Pani'* condenses the Mahad Satyagraha into a dramatic parable of dignity, asserting Ambedkar's principle that access to common resources is a fundamental human right. His other play, '*Kirvant',* challenges the hypocrisy of ritual purity and caste-bound priesthood, aligning with Ambedkar's symbolic burning of the '*Manusmriti'* and his demand for a rational, egalitarian religion. Datta Bhagat's *'Avart'* (Whirlpool) portrays the cyclical entrapment of Dalits within caste and class oppression, forcefully restating Ambedkar's revelation that social mobility without annihilation of caste remains fragile and incomplete. Dadakant Dhanvijay's *'Akinchan'* depicts the poverty of Dalits and their awakening against caste oppression. Disillusioned by upper-caste leaders who exploit and betray them, Namya mobilizes his community, contests elections, and wins affirming

Ambedkarite ideals of self-representation. The climax sharpens this resistance when Laxmi, a Dalit woman, kills an oppressor to defend her dignity, and her six-year-old son Jivanya strikes with the same sickle, symbolizing how generations of suppressed rage erupt, extending even to a child. Together, these plays not only dramatize Ambedkar's philosophy but also carve out a radical space for Dalit theatre as a cultural movement. By bringing to life the struggles for education, dignity, fraternity, and social justice, they turn the stage into an Ambedkarite platform of protest and renewal, strengthening Dalit theatrical traditions as instruments of consciousness and collective liberation.

While poems, stories, and autobiographies in Dalit literature gave voice to lived realities, the Dalit essay assumed the crucial task of theorizing, contextualizing, and politicizing those experiences. If autobiographies such as Daya Pawar's *'Baluta'* recorded the humiliation of caste, poems by Namdeo Dhasal transformed that pain into lyric protest, and stories by Baburao Bagul dramatized oppression through characters and situations, it was the essay that provided the analytical framework to connect these genres to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's structural critique of caste. Essays by Sharankumar Limbale *('Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature')* and Arjun Dangle *('Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future')* articulated that Dalit writing was not merely testimonial but an act of resistance, a deliberate intervention in culture and politics. In this way, the essay revealed Ambedkarism explicitly, situating caste alongside questions of class, gender, and labour exploitation, and reinforcing Ambedkar's insistence that social emancipation required nothing less than the total annihilation of caste.

By challenging Brahmanical canons and aesthetic norms that excluded or exoticized Dalit voices, Dalit essays expanded the space for alternative forms of writing. They insisted that literature be judged not only for its beauty but for its truth and

social purpose, thereby legitimizing works such as Valmiki's 'Joothan' or Dhasal's *'Golpitha'* as part of a new cultural paradigm. Speeches delivered at Dalit Sammelanas often took essay form, transforming oral declarations into written manifestos, much like Ambedkar's own pamphlets, and thus became tools of political education and collective consciousness. Where poems and autobiographies conveyed the affective intensity of humiliation, essays universalized those experiences into a social critique, ensuring that individual pain was not misread as private tragedy but recognized as political testimony demanding systemic change.

The intellectual clarity of these essays also inspired other literary forms, providing dramaturgical insights for plays such as Premanand Gajvee's *'Ghotbhar Pani'* and Datta Bhagat's *'Avart'*. In this sense, Dalit theatre was shaped as much by intellectual debate as by lived struggle. Autobiographies remember, poems protest, stories dramatize, but essays interpret and mobilize together forming a holistic Dalit literary movement grounded in Ambedkarism. Without essays, Dalit literature might remain fragmented or reduced to personal testimony; with them, it emerges as a coherent, self-aware movement of resistance and renewal, embodying Ambedkar's vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity in both form and content.

Religion too is a recurring concern. Dalit literature frequently revisits Ambedkar's great symbolic acts: the Mahad Satyagraha, the burning of the *'Manusmriti'*, and the conversion to Buddhism in 1956. These events are invoked not simply as history but as living metaphors of liberation. By recalling them, literature enacts a continuation of Ambedkar's political and spiritual struggles, keeping alive his vision of a rational, egalitarian, and just religious alternative. By addressing a varied range of issues, Dalit literature refuses to fragment the experiences of the oppressed. Instead, it weaves caste, class,

gender, and culture into a holistic narrative of struggle. Its power lies in its ability to turn lived pain into literary and political critique, while simultaneously offering Ambedkarite visions of resistance, solidarity, and transformation.

In Dalit literature, the figure of the Dalit hero embodies the deepest link between narrative and Ambedkarism. Ambedkar himself becomes both symbol and method for how resistance is shaped in these stories. Unlike traditional heroes celebrated in mainstream literature, the Dalit hero is not a mythical warrior or divine figure but an ordinary person who rises from conditions of humiliation to assert dignity, knowledge, and collective power. This redefinition of heroism is grounded in Ambedkar's life and philosophy, where education, struggle, and social assertion replace birth-based privilege as the true markers of greatness. In autobiographies, poems, and novels, the Dalit hero becomes the living embodiment of Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, organize." By grounding heroism in lived experience rather than divine sanction, Dalit literature applies Ambedkarism as a framework for imagining new forms of leadership, where the oppressed themselves become the architects of equality and justice.

Ambedkarism, whether traced through the life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar or through the voices of Dalit literature, emerges as a philosophy of total transformation. In Ambedkar's own life, it unfolded through struggles for education, social reform, political rights, constitutional democracy, and finally, a spiritual revolution in Buddhism. In Dalit literature, the same spirit continues, finding new forms of expression in stories, poems, and autobiographies that turn lived pain into collective resistance. What unites both is the conviction that justice cannot be partial, that liberation requires dismantling caste, patriarchy, and economic exploitation together. Ambedkarism thus becomes not only a memory of past struggles but also a

living method of critique and reconstruction, carried forward in literature as in politics, as a compass pointing toward a future grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

IV

Ambedkarism: Broader Academic Influence & Theoretical Horizon

Ambedkarism has evolved through recent history, yet it remains rooted in the collective consciousness of the 'Broken Man' who has suffered since time immemorial. Just as the Buddha fought against orthodox culture and guided people to the path of *'Nibbāna',* Dr. Ambedkar centered his movement of Dalit emancipation on the lived experience of suffering, leading his people through difficult times to restore dignity, self-respect, and chart the course of socio-economic and political development. Emerging from Dr. Ambedkar's critique of caste, colonialism, patriarchy, and the nationalist politics of the Congress, Ambedkarism has grown into a fertile intellectual resource across disciplines. From sociology to political theory, from feminist thought to constitutionalism, it now occupies a recognized place in global academic research, functioning both as a site of critical churning and as emancipatory praxis. In its functional approach, Ambedkarism was not conceived merely to diagnose inequalities but to provide a normative framework for liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice in modern democracies. Wherever an entrenched superior class subjugates an inferior counterpart and pushes them to the margins, Ambedkarism becomes active as a counter-force to guide the marginalized toward all-round growth.

Seen in this light, Ambedkarism is not confined to the historical social movement of Dalit emancipation; it has evolved into a living philosophy shaping theoretical discourse.

By placing caste at the center of debates on democracy, rights, and human dignity, Dr. Ambedkar reconfigured the very horizon of social theory. His sustained engagement with Marxism, socialism, liberalism, pragmatism, and Buddhism forged a distinctive intellectual tradition grounded in Indian realities. The broader academic influence of Ambedkarism thus lies in its ability to unsettle entrenched caste structures and their legitimating canons, while simultaneously proposing new perspectives of understanding.

In recent decades, Ambedkarism has moved beyond its Indian context to enter global academic debates. Recognizing its methodological efficacy in addressing critical race studies, subaltern agency, and decolonial thought, scholars increasingly read Ambedkar alongside African, African-American struggles and other histories of marginalization worldwide. The major strength of Ambedkarism lies in this comparative dialogue, which enables nuanced analyses of oppression, emancipation, and democratic governance as they unfold in the lived struggles of marginalized peoples. To appreciate the expanding horizon of Ambedkarism in global academia, it is necessary to map its applicability to diverse social realities. Its interdisciplinary reach continues to grow, making Ambedkarism a living resource for rethinking justice, equality, and emancipation in the contemporary world.

a. Dalit Historiography & Subaltern Studies

Dalit historiography emerges from a historical quest to recover the suppressed voices of India's marginalized communities. It challenges dominant upper-caste narratives that have long silenced Dalit histories and identities. The method of writing such counter-histories can be traced back to Mahatma Jotirao Phule, but it finds its most systematic and

powerful articulation in the socio-economic, political, and ideological writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

At its core, Dalit historiography seeks to 'expose caste-based hegemony' the principal force behind the historical dehumanization of Dalits. Even after independence, caste continues to shape social relations and subtly pushes Dalits to the margins of Indian society. Ambedkar's historical writings especially *'Who Were the Shudras?'* and *'The Untouchables'* offered a groundbreaking reinterpretation of ancient Indian history from the perspective of the oppressed. In 'Who Were the Shudras?' he traced how once-dominant Shudra rulers were gradually pushed into degradation through historic discrimination. In 'The Untouchables', he theorized the displacement of nomadic settlers by more powerful tribes, designating these dispossessed groups as the "broken men" ancestors of today's Dalits. This was the 'first real articulation of subaltern praxis' in the Indian context, long before the Subaltern Studies collective coined the term.

i. Phule and Ambedkar as Foundational Thinkers

Phule's works such as *'Brahmananche Kasab'*, '*Slavery',* and *'Shetkaryancha Asud'* exposed caste oppression, religious orthodoxy, and Brahminical dominance in 19th-century India. His *'Satyashodhak movement'* raised an early voice against caste-based inequality and social injustice. Building upon this intellectual lineage, Ambedkar not only unmasked caste hegemony but also connected it to 'imperial exploitation'. In his economic works of the 1920s such as *'The Problem of the Rupee'* and *'Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India'* he analyzed colonialism as a system of economic loot while simultaneously exposing how nationalist leaders, particularly the Congress, ignored Dalit emancipation in their anti-colonial struggle.

This dual critique of 'colonialism and Brahmanical caste order' sets Ambedkar apart from both nationalist historiography and Subaltern Studies. Where the Subaltern collective privileged European Marxist categories, Ambedkar rooted his historical method in Indian realities, drawing from archaeology, literary traditions, and contemporary social research.

Besides, Phule and Ambedkar south Indian prominent leaders Iyothi Thass, Narayana Guru and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy played a crucial role in exposing the caste hegemony. Though his movement Periyar challenges traditional narratives and centering the history of oppressed groups, particularly non-Brahmins and Dalits, through the Self-Respect Movement. Periyar's movement aimed to provide a sense of pride based on the pre-Brahminical Dravidian past, offering an alternative historical narrative to the Brahmanical-dominated history that had marginalized non-Brahmins.

ii. Dalit Voices in History and Literature

Dalit historiography is not confined to academic research alone it draws heavily on oral traditions, poetry, and literature. Voices of resistance can be traced from medieval figures like Sant Chokhamela to 20th-century Dalit Shahirs, who expressed their agonies through Jalsa and Tamasha performances. Many of these were later published in Ambedkar's journals *'Samata', 'Janata'* and *'Prabuddha Bharat'* during the 1930s and 1940s. In the post-Ambedkarite era, Dalit literature took this tradition further through autobiographies, short stories, and protest poetry, systematically documenting lived experiences of caste-based exploitation.

Ambedkar himself, as a pioneering Indologist, produced monumental works *'Riddles in Hinduism'*, *'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in India',* and numerous essays on 'Decline of Buddhism' that exposed Brahmanical hegemony from the

Vedic period onwards. His famous remark at Wagle Hall in 1942 "It was wrong to tell people to forget history. They cannot make history, who forget history" (Narake, 2019, Vol 17 III, 262) became a guiding principle for Dalit historians.

iii. Dalit Theology and Cross-Religious Perspectives

Dalit historiography has also expanded through religious and theological studies. Rev. James Massey, a Dalit Christian theologian, traced Dalit struggles for identity and liberation in works such as *'The Downtrodden'* and *'Dalits in India'*. He criticized upper-caste Christian theologians for ignoring Ambedkar and Phule, noting how they relied on reformers like Rammohan Roy or Gandhi instead. In his reading, showing how caste critique intersected with global questions of religion and liberation.

iv. From Victimhood to Agency

Early Dalit histories highlighted oppression and exclusion, but recent Dalit historiography emphasizes 'agency and resistance'. Dalit scholars now analyze how marginalized communities have continuously challenged caste domination, whether through social movements, cultural expression, or political activism. This marks a shift from portraying Dalits merely as victims to recognizing them as 'historical agents of change'.

v. Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions

Dalit historiography today is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from sociology, anthropology, literature, political theory, and cultural studies. Ambedkar himself pioneered this method, weaving together economics, history, law, and religion in his writings. Recent Dalit scholars extend this by situating Dalit struggles within 'global histories of marginalization'. As

Ramnarayan Rawat notes, Dalit history resonates with the experiences of African Americans under racism and Japan's Burakumin, showing how systems of exclusion and resistance echo across the world.

vi. Dalit Historiography and Ambedkarism: A Critique of Subaltern Studies

Subaltern Studies, which emerged in the 1980s under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, is often seen as a radical intervention in Indian historiography. However, it developed much later than Dalit historiography, which had already been pioneered through the intellectual and political projects of Mahatma Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Both Subaltern Studies and Dalit historiography share the stated objective of rewriting history from the perspective of the marginalized. Yet their methodological and ideological orientations differ sharply: Dalit historiography is rooted in the lived experience of caste oppression and grounded in Ambedkarism, while Subaltern Studies leaned heavily on European Marxist frameworks.

The concept of "Dalit" has historically been expansive, encompassing all marginalized and oppressed groups. The Dalit Panthers famously broadened its scope in their manifesto: "Members of Scheduled caste and tribes, Neo-Buddhist, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (Dalit Panthers, 2002–2013: ix). In contrast, the term "subaltern" comes from Antonio Gramsci, and Guha reinterpreted it in the South Asian context. As he explained in *Subaltern Studies I*: "The word 'subaltern' is used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1982: vii). This formulation is significant, since it attempts to move beyond purely economic exploitation and

recognize multiple dimensions of subordination. Yet in practice, Subaltern Studies often reduced subalternity to class and colonial domination, leaving caste underexplored.

Guha's engagement with Gramsci is central to his theoretical project. While Gramsci analyzed capitalism through 'cultural hegemony', Guha applied the framework to colonial India. His claim that: "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" (Guha, 1999: xvi), underscores the paradox of resistance subaltern struggles, even when autonomous, remain caught within hegemonic structures. This reading, however, did not adequately address 'caste hierarchy', which in India functions as an autonomous and deeply entrenched axis of power.

Dalit Historiography and Caste Centrality

Unlike Subaltern Studies, Dalit historiography places caste at the very center of marginalization. Dalit studies emphasize that 'caste is not reducible to classes but is the basic element of systemic exclusion in India. As journalist Dilip Mandal pointed out in 2023: "Guha superheaded a tradition of doing subaltern studies in South Asia, without considering caste and anti-caste struggle" (Ghai, 2023). Mandal further criticized the exclusion of major Dalit and Shudra intellectuals such as Phule, Savitribai Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Mangu Ram, Narayana Guru, and Jogendranath Mandal from the Subaltern canon, despite their being authentic subaltern voices. This exclusion reflects what Dalit scholars describe as the 'caste-blindness of Subaltern Studies'. Virginius Xaxa, a sociologist, similarly noted that locating "the peasant" as the archetypal subaltern erases important differences: "If you look at this from an Adivasi perspective, there is a lot of difference between Adivasi and non-Adivasi peasants which is because of culture, social organization and values" (Ghai, 2023). Thus, both Dalit and Adivasi scholars argue that Subaltern Studies homogenized the

category of the oppressed, while ignoring caste and cultural specificities.

Kancha Ilaiah, one of the most influential contemporary Dalit-Bahujan thinkers, has been explicit in his critique: "This group headed by Guha, used the Italian term 'subaltern' denoting the lowest of the society, mostly working classes and peasants. They did some good writing about peasants and their role in Indian nationalism. But they were completely caste-blind" (Ghai, 2023). Ilaiah further observed with dismay that the Subaltern Studies collective ignored Ambedkar altogether: "In my view, it is another elite, Bhadralok history which never touched the basic issue of graded inequality and human untouchability. They (Guha and others) included Gandhi, Nehru and Bose in these studies but nothing on Ambedkar even as a scholar. It was basically a Bengal-centred project on peasant revolts based on Gramsci and Mao's understanding of peasant revolts" (Ghai, 2023). This selective erasure of Ambedkar is striking, since Ambedkar had long before theorized caste as the foundation of Indian inequality and had systematically critiqued both Brahmanism and imperialism.

Ambedkar's Alternative Framework

Ambedkar was not only a political leader but also a rigorous scholar. His historical works '*Who Were the Shudras?*' and *'The Untouchables'* demonstrated how caste emerged through historical displacements and how "broken men" were relegated to the margins of Indian society. His economic writings of the 1920s, including 'The Problem of the Rupee', exposed the exploitative mechanisms of colonial rule. Unlike Subaltern theorists, Ambedkar connected the 'colonial loot of India' with the 'internal hegemony of caste', making his framework far more comprehensive. Dr. Ambedkar also offered 'solutions': advocating industrialization to break caste-based occupational hierarchies and envisioning social democracy as the only path toward Dalit emancipation. In

contrast, Subaltern Studies often remained descriptive, highlighting peasant insurgency but offering no structural program for transformation.

Dalit Historiography as Corrective

Dalit historiography, grounded in Ambedkarism, stands as a 'corrective to both nationalist and subaltern historiography'. Where nationalist histories celebrated elite leadership, and Subaltern Studies foregrounded colonial resistance, Dalit historiography insists on recovering the 'silenced histories of caste oppression and resistance'. As Ambedkar emphasized, remembering history is essential for transformation: "It was wrong to tell people to forget history. They cannot make history, who forget history" (Ambedkar, 1942). Dalit historiography therefore combines 'historical method with political praxis', moving from victimhood to agency. It documents resistance not only in elite archives but also in oral traditions, Dalit literature, and community memory.

Ambedkarism beyond Subalternity

Subaltern Studies relied heavily on Marxist frameworks and Gramscian categories, which made class and colonialism its central axes. Ambedkarism, however, placed 'caste' at the heart of Indian social analysis and connected it to both imperialism and global histories of oppression. The Dalit movement, drawing from Ambedkar, produced not just theory but also tangible praxis: constitutional safeguards, political representation, and cultural assertion. Thus, while Subaltern Studies is often celebrated in global academia, its caste-blindness limits its explanatory power in postcolonial India. Dalit historiography, by contrast, remains deeply relevant both as an intellectual project and as a movement for emancipation. Its grounding in Ambedkarism makes it better equipped to analyze caste-based oppression and to connect Dalit struggles with global marginalities, from racism in the US and Europe to

the Burakumin of Japan. In this sense, 'Ambedkarism holds the theoretical edge over Subaltern Studies', offering a more incisive and transformative account of Indian history from below.

b. Post-Ambedkarite Anti-Caste Cultural Discourse

The post-Ambedkar period is marked by the growing urgency of Ambedkar's relevance. While visible forms of caste discrimination untouchability, segregation in villages, physical violence have been legally outlawed, caste oppression has not disappeared. Instead, it has transformed into 'high-tech and institutionalized forms of discrimination', manifesting in workplaces, industries, universities, and even digital spaces. Outwardly, India projects a secular, democratic image, especially given the electoral importance of Dalit communities. Yet beneath this veneer, the 'psyche of caste superiority remains intact', silently working against Dalits even when they occupy positions of power in employment, politics, or higher education.

This persistent contradiction legal equality on one hand, and lived exclusion on the other forced Dalits to devise 'radical responses' in the decades after Ambedkar. The emergence of the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s exemplified this militant assertion, echoing Ambedkar's call that "they cannot make history, who forget history." By remembering history, Dalit movements sought not just to narrate oppression but to 'reclaim dignity and agency'.

As a result, the post-Ambedkarite period witnessed a cultural renaissance in anti-caste discourse. Dalit organizations and intellectuals extended Ambedkar's legacy into new domains: radical activism, Dalit literature, street plays, theatre, and later, films and social media. What began as local protest movements evolved into a 'diverse cultural ethos', where

poems, autobiographies, manifestos, movies, and even short digital reels became tools of resistances in the rapid changing times. Movements like the Dalit Panthers and Republican student movement, alongside the growth of Dalit theatre and cinema, ensured that anti-caste cultural politics remained vibrant, relevant, and adaptive to changing times. The post-Ambedkarite anti-caste cultural discourse is not merely a continuation of Ambedkar's thought it is its creative expansion, keeping alive his vision of annihilating caste while confronting its modern, often invisible forms. Followings are some important areas in the anti-caste discourse which we need to discuss:

i. Samata Sainik Dal and The Buddhist Society of India: Pillars of Ambedkarism

The Samata Sainik Dal (Army of Soldiers for Equality) was formally founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on 19 March 1927, just a day before the historic Mahad Satyagraha. Initially, Ambedkar's associates had named the group the *'Bhim Sainik Dal'* (3 March 1927), formed partly to protect his life after threats were issued when he declared the Satyagraha for Dalits' right to drink water from public tanks. However, Ambedkar resisted the idea of personal glorification. Instead, he renamed the group *'Samata Sainik Dal'*, shifting its focus from loyalty to him as an individual to loyalty to the larger ideals of 'Liberty, Equality, fraternity and justice'. This move is significant: Ambedkar consciously built movements that transcended personality cults, rooting them in collective principles.

The Dal grew into a mass organization with branches in cities, towns, and villages. In its 1942 Nagpur convention, held at a crucial moment during World War II and the Quit India Movement, the '*All India Scheduled Caste Federation'* was also established showing how Ambedkar linked grassroots mobilization with national-level political strategy. By 1945, Ambedkar had approved the SSD's constitution and flag,

formalizing its role as a disciplined Ambedkarite organization. The objectives of SSD were clear: to mobilize Dalits, organize public meetings, resist caste oppression, and embody Ambedkar's motto of "Educate, Agitate, Organize." During Ambedkar's lifetime, the SSD acted as the backbone of his campaigns supporting his conferences, protecting Dalit gatherings, and ensuring vigilance against caste atrocities.

In the post-Ambedkarite period, the SSD continued, though not without splits similar to the fragmentation of the 'Republican Party of India'. Its presence today is still visible in *'Deekshabhoomi* (Nagpur)' and *'Chaityabhoomi* (Mumbai)' during commemorative events, where members march in uniform and organize logistics for the lakhs of followers who arrive. The SSD has also extended its role into activism against caste atrocities, often providing 'legal aid and moral support to victims'. The current national president is Bhimrao Yashwant Ambedkar, Dr. Ambedkar's grandson, under whom the organization maintains a nationwide structure of provincial, district, and village committees. The SSD's continuing presence highlights both the strength and the fragility of Ambedkarite organizations. While its disciplined structure ensures visibility, its splits show the difficulty of sustaining unity after Ambedkar's death. Nevertheless, its endurance demonstrates how Ambedkarite organizations remain living forces of resistance and cultural identity.

A second crucial institution founded by Ambedkar was the *'Buddhist Society of India (Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha)',* formally established on 4 May 1955 in Mumbai. Its roots lay in the earlier *'Bharatiya Bauddha Jansangh'* (1951), which Ambedkar had created to lay the groundwork for mass conversion. By transforming it into the BSI, Ambedkar sought to institutionalize the spread of Buddhism as both a spiritual and socio-political alternative to caste Hinduism. The BSI's

objectives were explicitly linked to Ambedkar's dream of a '*Prabuddha Bharat (Enlightened India)*':

1. To spread Buddhism and establish a casteless society.

2. To set up educational institutions, orphanages, and relief centers.

3. To publish Buddhist literature and promote comparative religious studies.

The Society's first major responsibility was to coordinate the historic Nagpur conversion ceremony of 1956, where Ambedkar and half a million followers embraced Buddhism at Deekshabhoomi. Since then, the BSI has served as the organizational backbone of Ambedkarite Buddhism in India. Today, the organization is led by Rajratna Ambedkar, Dr. Ambedkar's great-grandson, who continues to promote Buddhist teachings and Ambedkarite ideology.

The impact of SSD and BSI must be seen together. Across towns and villages, Ambedkarite communities typically sustain three institutional pillars: the Samata Sainik Dal (political-mobilizational), the Buddhist Society of India (spiritual-cultural), and the Republican party of Inda' (Political party). These institutions not only foster local leadership but also embed Ambedkarite values into everyday life through political participation, educational initiatives, and cultural-religious practices.

These organisations embody Ambedkarism by fusing Social justice, vigilance, equality and Buddhism in collective action. They show Ambedkar's genius in institution-building but also highlight the continuing struggle to keep his vision alive, radical and relevant in contemporary India.

ii. Republican Students Federation and Early Post-Ambedkarite Student Movements

The seeds of post-Ambedkarite student activism were sown in the 1960s with the formation of the *'Republican Students Federation (RSF)'*, active in Nagpur, Mumbai, and Aurangabad. The RSF was not an isolated initiative; it was directly connected to the *'Scheduled Caste Students' Federation (SCSF)'* founded earlier by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. When the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation was dissolved to form the *'Republican Party of India (RPI)'* in 1956, its student wing too transformed into the RSF. In this sense, the RSF embodied continuity with Ambedkar's original vision of student activism as the vanguard of social transformation.

However, as many early RSF leaders migrated into the mainstream RPI, the organization weakened. It was revived in 1963 by Ambedkarite college students such as Suryakant Dongre (President) and Tarachand Khandekar (Secretary). Tarachand Khandekar later rose to become one of the most prominent interpreters of Ambedkarism through public forums and writings. Under their stewardship, the RSF gained credibility, joined them the leaders like Bhau Lokhande, Ashok Godghate, Ranajit Meshram, and Balchandra Khandekar, who went on to become respected professors, social leaders, and public intellectuals.

Democratically registered and structured, the RSF raised crucial issues: fee hikes, caste discrimination within universities, demand for gold medals for Scheduled Caste students, and the systemic neglect of 'Phule, Shahu, and Ambedkar' in curricula. The federation also contested student elections, creating a platform for Dalit youth to assert themselves in spaces that, despite India's constitutional guarantees, remained deeply casteist. Significantly, the RSF organized its 'annual conference at Deekshabhoomi', timed a

day before the Dhammachakra Pravartan Din, thereby linking student politics directly to Ambedkar's religious and cultural legacy. One such RSF conference was inaugurated by the renowned American scholar Eleanor Zelliot, highlighting its international connections. The RSF also hosted lecture series at the University Library, Ramdaspeth, Nagpur, blending academic discourse with activism. A similar such RSF affiliated to the original one was founded in Panjabrao Krishi Vidyapith by Madhukar Tembhurne which continue for many decades later.

Despite these vibrant initiatives, the RSF's activities remained localized and poorly documented, limiting its long-term visibility in the history of Indian student politics. Yet, its significance lies in preparing the ground for the 'radicalization of Dalit student politics in the following decade', including the rise of the Dalit Panthers. From 1980 onwards new Ambedkarite student's organizations rise up in different universities which are working vibrantly till the date. *Ambedkar Students Association (ASA)* actively available in university of Hyderabad, University of Mumbai, Tata Institutie of social Sciences (YISS) and in Panjaqb University. Birasa, *Ambedkar Phule Students Association (BAPSA)* is active in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. *Ambedkarite Students Association (ASA)* is active in Hyderabad University and Central University of Kerala. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Students Organisation* is available within RTM Nagpur university. *The Dalit Adivasi Bahujan Minority Students Association (DABMSA)* was active at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Telangana. Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) - Gujarat Chapter available in Gujarat.

iii. Ambedkar Adhyayan Mandal and Intellectual Churning

In the early 1970s, another student-centered intellectual forum emerged: the 'Ambedkar Adhyayan Mandal, Nagpur. This organization regularly organized lecture series on social issues and on the thoughts of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar. Notably, prominent Dalit scholars such as Eleanor Zelliot and D. R. Jatava were invited to deliver lectures, showing the Mandal's seriousness in grounding student activism within scholarly and ideological frameworks. It also published a research journal, 'Dhammadeep', which encouraged both students and faculty to contribute papers and participate in weekly discussions. This initiative created a culture of reflective learning rooted in Ambedkarite thought, balancing the activism of the RSF with sustained intellectual engagement.

iv. Muktivahini and the Cultural Awakening

In 1973–74, *'the Muktivahini'* was formed in Nagpur, contributing significantly to the cultural dimension of Dalit activism. Its focus on street plays, literary festivals (Sahitya Melava), and cultural discussions demonstrated how anti-caste politics was not confined to electoral struggles but extended into the everyday cultural sphere. *Muktivahini* is particularly remembered for its involvement in organizing the *First All-India Dalit Sahitya Sammelan'* on 17–18 January 1976, held at P.W.S. Arts and Commerce College, Indora Square, Nagpur. The Sammelan, chaired by Dr. M. N. Wankhede and inaugurated by Baburao Bagul, marked a watershed in Dalit cultural assertion. Dr. Madhukarraoji Wasnik, founder of P.W.S. College, shouldered the responsibility as Swagatadyaksha. The Sammelana was made possible by the collective efforts of *Muktivahini* members such as 'Tarachand Khandekar, I. M. Narnavare, K. R. Waldekar, Narendra Shelar,

Suresh Meshram, Dr. Nilkant Kalange, Naresh Sakhare, Ashok Gedam, and Raja Karwande', etc.

Muktivahini's significance lies in how it fused culture with activism. Its members not only organized festivals and conferences but also nurtured a sustained tradition of 'poets' meets and periodic discussions', keeping alive the Ambedkarite spirit of critical engagement and collective cultural production. Though local and often undocumented, these initiatives created a fertile ground for the radical Dalit Panthers of the 1970s, and for the broader anti-caste cultural discourse that continues today.

v. Radical Interventions: Dalit Panthers, and Beyond

The radical cultural-political assertion of the 1970s was deeply shaped by global currents, particularly the *'Black Panther Party'* in the United States. Founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, *the Black Panthers* combined militant self-defense against police brutality with community-based social programs, such as free breakfast schemes and health clinics. Their insistence on racial pride, grassroots organizing, and uncompromising critique of state violence resonated strongly with Dalit youth in India.

It is against this backdrop that the *'Dalit Panthers'* were founded in 1972 in Maharashtra by Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J. V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble. Inspired by the Black Panthers' militant politics, the Panthers rapidly expanded across urban and rural Maharashtra. Their constituency was primarily Professors, Social Activists, Dalit Writers, college students and unemployed Dalit youth, who carried forward Ambedkar's legacy with new aggression. The Panthers' cultural strategy was striking: they used literature, manifestos, magazines such as *'Vidrohi'* and *'Sadhana'*, poetry, novels, and street plays as weapons of dissent.

Prominent literary interventions included Dhasal's explosive anthology *'Golpitha'* (1972), which drew upon Mumbai's red-light district as a metaphor for social decay; Raja Dhale's provocative essay *'Kala Swatantrya Din'* (Black Independence Day, 1972), which questioned the meaning of independence for Dalits; and J. V. Pawar's novel *'Balidaan'* (1969) and poetry collection *'Nakebandi'* (1976). These works transformed Dalit experience into cultural-political rebellion, proving that anti-caste cultural discourse was inseparable from political struggle.

Importantly, the Panthers expanded the meaning of "Dalit" to include all the oppressed: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, landless peasants, women, and other exploited groups. In doing so, they advanced a 'radical, inclusive identity politics', directly challenging both Hindu orthodoxy and the failures of Congress and Communist parties to address caste oppression. Their militancy brought them close in spirit to the Black Panthers, though their fight was firmly rooted in Indian caste realities.

vi. Namantar Andolan: Culture, Politics, and Violence

The 'Namantar Movement' of the late 1970s further deepened post-Ambedkarite radicalism. Initiated in 1978, the demand was to rename Marathwada University in Aurangabad after Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, honoring his educational struggles and legacy in the region. Led by Dalit Panthers like Arun Kamble, alongside leaders such as Gangadhar Gade, Jogendra Kawade, and Ramdas Athawale, the movement symbolized Dalit unity and Ambedkarite consciousness. Nagpur Ambedlarite circle formed a committee: *'Namantar Kruri Samitee'* to support the Namantar Andolan. The long March led by Professor Jogendra Kawade was the unanimous decision of the action committee, impacted on the entire andolan and influence the government. Namantar Andolan was heavily

opposed by the casteist forces in the state and started attacking the Dalit activists of the andolan. The response from dominant caste groups was violent. As records show: "Riots affected 1,200 villages in Marathwada, impacting on 25,000 Marathi Buddhist and Hindu Dalits and causing thousands of them to seek safety in jungles… took many forms, including killings, burning of houses and huts, pillaging of Dalit colonies, forcing Dalits out of villages, polluting drinking water wells, destruction of cattle, and refusal to employ" (Wikipedia, 2025). Dalit colonies were burned, statues of Ambedkar desecrated, and many Dalit students lost their education and careers due to displacement. The violence exposed the enduring hostility of caste society, despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Yet, the movement persisted for over a decade and culminated in 1994, when the Maharashtra government agreed by renaming the University with a compromised name as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University.

The RSF, Dalit Panthers, and Namantar Andolan together reveal the continuity of Ambedkarite politics in cultural form. Where Dr. Ambedkar used history, law, and democratic institutions, these movements used 'literature, performance, militancy, and mass protest'. The Dalit Panthers, in particular, demonstrated that culture was not separate from politics it was a 'battleground for identity, dignity, and self-respect'. The Namantar movement, though met with brutal violence, became a 'symbolic victory', ensuring Ambedkar's name and memory remained tied to the institutions of higher learning he had championed. In essence, post-Ambedkarite radical organizations fused 'political assertion with cultural discourse', keeping alive the Ambedkarite vision while adapting it to new challenges of caste-based violence and discrimination in independent India.

vii. Cultural Assertion and Global Ambedkarite Ethos

In the post-Ambedkarite era, culture emerged as a crucial site of both resistance and reconstruction. What began in the 1960s with cultural organizations and forums such as the *'Asmitadarsh Melawa',* which projected Dalit literature through poetry and short stories, soon expanded into radical forms of expression in the 1970s through the Dalit Panthers' poetry, street plays, and manifestos. These initiatives laid the foundations of a wider Ambedkarite cultural ethos, today expressed across literature, theatre, cinema, music, and digital media.

Folk traditions such as *'Tamasha'* and *'Jalasa'*, long associated with marginalized classes and dismissed by cultural elites, were redefined within the Ambedkarite movement. While *'Tamasha'* gradually declined, 'Jalasa' transformed into *'Ambedkari Jalasa'*, tracing its roots to the 'Satyashodhak Jalasa' of the 1920s. Its purpose was no longer mere entertainment but the 'propagation of Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophy' through folk songs, music, and poetry. In this form, performance became a political tool preserving the memory of oppression, demanding social equality, and asserting Dalit dignity.

Ambedkari-Jalasa: Folk Form as Political Pedagogy

With the growth of Dr. Ambedkar's socio-political movement, 'Ambedkari-Jalasa' emerged as a powerful cultural expression of Dalit emancipation and the spread of Ambedkarite philosophy. These performances were far more than entertainment: 'Jalasa' songs carried messages of social awakening, urging parents to educate their children, exposing caste as the root of suffering, and connecting audiences to the liberatory traditions of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar. At their

core, these songs articulated the vision of a 'casteless society grounded in liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice'.

True to Ambedkar's call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize," 'Jalasa' performances promoted this trident of Ambedkarism as a living cultural practice. Sung in local languages with lyrical resonance, the songs of *'Shahirs' (folk bards)* reached deep into the grassroots, awakening consciousness in communities otherwise excluded from mainstream cultural spaces.

The transformation of *Jalasa* into an explicitly Ambedkarite form began with 'Shahir Bhimrao Kardak in the 1920s', who used popular musical idioms to spread Ambedkar's message of Dalit emancipation. Later figures such as Wamandada Kardak who composed over 10,000 songs in the 1980s and 1990s expanded the form with rich imagery and poetic power, inspiring generations of Dalit poets. Alongside him, Annabhau Sathe's 'Powadas', Vilas Ghogare, and Shantanu Kamble carried forward Ambedkarite content in folk styles.

The next generation saw performers like Vitthal Umap, whose untimely death in 2010 while performing at Deekshabhoomi symbolized the dedication of Shahirs to their craft and community. In contemporary times, educated Shahirs such as Aniruddha Vanakar (Chandrapur) and Sambhaji Bhagat continue the tradition, composing songs rooted in Ambedkarism and mobilizing Dalit consciousness.

Ambedkari-Jalasa reveals Ambedkar's genius in turning culture into pedagogy. By reshaping folk traditions often dismissed as "low" art, the movement reclaimed cultural space for the marginalized and infused it with political meaning. Each Jalasa was both a performance and a classroom teaching Ambedkar's ideals, narrating histories of oppression, and envisioning a new social order. In doing so, it exemplified Ambedkarism's emphasis on combining rational critique with

emotional appeal, ensuring that the struggle for equality reached not just urban elites but the rural grassroots.

Bheem Geet: Anthem of Ambedkarite Awakening

Among Ambedkarite communities, '*Bheem Geet'* has emerged as one of the most enduring cultural forms of resistance. Modeled somewhat on the 'Bhava-Geet' tradition of Marathi, it has its origins in the Ambedkarite movement itself, making it distinct from mainstream literary song forms. Initially sung by Shahirs in *'Jalasa'* and *'Tamasha'* programs, Bheem Geet later acquired an independent life in Buddha Viharas and public commemorations especially on Dr. Ambedkar's birth anniversary (14 April), Buddha Jayanti, and Mahaparinirvan Din (6 December). These performances transformed communal memory into living pedagogy, teaching Ambedkar's philosophy through music.

The roots of *Bheem Geet* trace back to the 1930s, with pioneers like Keruba Ghengde, Bhau Phakkad, Nagorao Patankar, and Haribhau Sonule. Notably, Nagorao Patankar performed before Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at the historic Yeola Conference of 1935, where Ambedkar declared he would not die a Hindu. Carrying this tradition forward, Wamandada Kardak drawing inspiration from his father Bhimrao Kardak composed numerous Buddha-Bhim songs that awakened Dalit consciousness.

In the post-Ambedkarite era, artists such as Vitthal Umap and Pralhad Shinde popularized *'Bheem Geet'* from the late 1960s, with Shinde's sons, Anand and Milind Shinde, continuing the legacy through multiple albums in Maharashtra. Some singers who began performing during Ambedkar's own lifetime, contemporaneous with Nagorao Patankar, continued their work into the 1960s and 1970s. Among them were Late Vijayanand Jadhav (Aurangabad), Late Pratapsingh Badade (Mumbai), and Late Rajanand Gadpayale. Legecy of Nagorao

Patankar in Bheet-Geet is continued with his son Prakashnath Patankar

Women performers also left a lasting mark. Late Hemalata Khobragade, a schoolteacher, became one of the earliest female voices of 'Bheem Geet'. She released her album *'Buddha Jyoti Geet' in 1982* at Dhanwate Sabhagriha, Nagpur, launched by Barrister Rajabhau Khobragade. She was also among the first women to sing *'Buddha-Bhim Geet'* on Nagpur Radio (Akashwani) in the 1970s. Another pioneering female voice was Ambedkarite Qawwal Ms. Sushma Devi, who rose to fame with her song *'Majhya Bhimachya Navach Kunku Lavile Ramaan'* and went on to release numerous albums. Continuing the legacy of her father, Nagorao Patankar, Late Kiran Patankar enriched the tradition of *'Bheem Geet'* with many popular songs such as *'Bhima Tujhyamule'*, *'Jaybhim Ka Naara'*, and *'Likkha Sanvidhan Hai'*.

Current generation of Bhim-Geet singers continued to enrich the field. Prof. Anilkumar Khobragade (retired Professor of Music at VNGISS, Nagpur), Ms. Chhaya Wankhede, Prabodhankar Rahul Anvikar (Aurangabad), Abhijeet Kosambi (Mainstrem popular singer), Dr. Buddharatna Lihitkar (Professor of Music at VNGISS, Nagpur), Prabhakar Pokharikar, Suryakant Bhagat, Ms. Akanksha Nagarkar, Ms. Ahinsa Tirpude, Rahul Sathe, and Vijay Sartape have all contributed significantly, with many of their recordings now widely available on YouTube and social media.

Over nearly a century, Bheem Geet has evolved across media from oral performance to cassette culture in the 1980s and 1990s, CD albums in the early 2000s, and now digital platforms. This professionalization has provided livelihoods for singers and composers, while also turning Ambedkarite music into a cultural industry of resistance.

Bheem Geet serves as a musical embodiment of Ambedkarism, carrying forward the trident call to 'Educate, Agitate, Organize'. The songs narrate Ambedkar's struggles, expose caste oppression, and inspire collective pride in Dalit identity. They also situate Ambedkar in a broader genealogy of social revolution, linking him with Buddha, Phule, Shahu, and Birsa Munda. Importantly, each generation reshapes Bheem Geet with its own rhythms and styles, proving its adaptability and relevance.

More than an art form, Bheem-Geet acts as 'cultural protest' and 'community memory'. It ensures that Ambedkar's message of equality, rationality, and fraternity resonates not only in political speeches but also in the everyday lives of people sung in homes, Viharas, and public squares. In this sense, Bheem Geet is both archive and anthem: it preserves history while mobilizing future struggles for justice.

Ambedkarite Qawwali: Anti-Caste Assertion

Another vibrant strand of Ambedkarite cultural expression is *'Qawwali'*, a form originally rooted in the Sufi devotional tradition. The connection between Dalits and *Qawwali* has historical depth: unlike caste Hindus, Muslims did not practice untouchability toward Dalits, and in many cases, marginalized sections of Muslim communities shared a sense of solidarity with them. Before the mass conversions to Buddhism in 1956, several Dalit groups were already drawn to saintly traditions following Kabir, Chakradhar Swami's Mahanubhava sect, or Sufi saints like Baba Farid. In some regions, Dalits even reported to be converted to Islam as a way of escaping caste stigma before Dalits got converted to Buddhism. Against this background, Dalit engagement with *Qawwali* was not an artificial borrowing but a natural extension of shared experiences of marginality and spiritual protest. While *Sufi Qawwali* was devotional, Ambedkarite performers transformed it into a medium of 'political assertion'. Their songs invoked

Ambedkar, Phule, and the broader anti-caste movement, turning the stage into a forum of mobilization. Performances often retained *Qawwali's* traditional element of 'on-stage debate', where two singers challenged one another in poetic dialogue. But the content was sharpened: audiences were invited to reflect on caste oppression, to recognize their shared suffering, and to embrace the Ambedkarite path of emancipation. The emotional intensity of high-pitched songs, backed by rhythm and chorus, reinforced this message, binding entertainment with agitation.

Ambedkarite Qawwali is frequently 'bilingual', mixing Hindi and Marathi, thereby reaching diverse audiences. Its popularization began with 'Pralhad Shinde' and Nagorao Patankar and gained national traction through 'Prakashnath Patankar' son of Shahir Nagorao Patankar. Patankar's repertoire included both *Ambedkarite Qawwalis* and heroic Bheem Geet such as *"Bhim Ke Lakhte Jigar"* (lamenting the split of the RPI) and *"Woh Baat Karo Paidaa Apani Jubaano Mein"* (inspiring youth to follow Ambedkar's example). His work continues to resonate, with some of his compositions even remixed into DJ culture. His sister late Kiran Patankar, along with performers like Rekha Bharati, Sushama devi, Anupam, and Asit Sapkale, further carried the form forward across Maharashtra and beyond. *Ambedkarite Qawwali* demonstrates how traditional forms can be repurposed into cultural weapons of resistance. By retaining the dialogic and emotive force of *Sufi Qawwali* but embedding it with Ambedkarite content, Dalits created a genre that blends spiritual protest with political pedagogy. The performances call upon audiences to reject caste oppression, claim dignity, and pursue education and social advancement goals central to Ambedkar's vision.

As with *Jalasa* and *Bheem-Geet, Qawwali* exemplifies the flexibility of Ambedkarism: it does not reject cultural traditions but reshapes them into tools of struggle. In this

transformation, *Qawwali* becomes more than music it is a collective assertion of identity, memory, and hope, mobilizing masses for the unfinished task of annihilating caste.

Ambedkarite Ghazal: Lyrical Resistance

The Ghazal, traditionally a refined poetic form of love, longing, and philosophy in Urdu and Marathi, has also been adapted within the Ambedkarite movement as a vehicle of social critique and cultural assertion. In Marathi circle it was popularized by poet Suresh Bhatt. In Ambedkarite circles, composers and singers reinterpreted the form to reflect the struggles of Dalits and to carry forward the spirit of Dr. Ambedkar's emancipatory vision. Prominent voices such as Bhimrao Panchale and Ashok Nikalje pioneered the Ambedkarite Ghazal tradition, blending the elegance of classical form with the urgency of social protest.

Unlike mainstream *ghazals*, which often dwell on romance or metaphysical reflection, *Ambedkarite ghazals* are overtly political. Their lyrics highlight caste oppression, social injustice, and the transformative power of education and activism. They articulate Ambedkar's role as a catalyst for social change, turning a traditionally elite art form into an accessible medium of Dalit assertion. Performances typically involve a full musical ensemble harmonium, tabla, and other instruments but the defining feature is the internalization of Ambedkarite thought, which gives the Ghazal its activist edge.

Ambedkarite Ghazels illustrate how cultural traditions can be retooled to serve new ideological purposes. By appropriating a genre historically associated with refined courtly or romantic themes, Dalit artists inserted Ambedkarism into elite cultural space, reclaiming dignity and agency. In this sense, the Ambedkarite ghazal belongs to the broader universe of Bheem

Geet, as it too functions as musical pedagogy teaching resistance, preserving memory, and inspiring emancipation.

Dalit Theatre: Performing Ambedkarism on Stage and Beyond

Dalit theatre is a vital strand of Dalit literature, rooted in the egalitarian philosophies of Buddha, Jyotiba Phule, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Emerging from the 'Satyashodhak movement' of Phule and indigenous folk idioms like *'Tamasha', 'Jalsa', 'Shahiri'*, and *'Lavani'*, it spoke in languages accessible to ordinary people: direct, dialogic, and resistant. These forms were long cultivated by communities such as the Mahars and Mangs, yet mainstream Marathi theatre dismissed them as "low" art, revealing caste prejudice even in cultural spaces.

Before Ambedkar's intervention, Dalit stage presence remained sporadic. While Mahatama Phule's *'Tritiya Ratna'* (1855) and later plays by K. F. Bansode *'Sant Chokhamela'*, (1924) and Kerubua Gaikwad kept the tradition alive, Dalit characters in mainstream theatre were often caricatured as comic relief or subordinates. Local initiatives like colony plays and *'Vag-Natyas'* (street plays) persisted, preserving performance as critique, but without an organized ideological framework.

It was Ambedkarism that transformed theatre into sustained political practice. Shahir Wamandada Kardak and Annabhau Sathe blended Phule's radicalism with Ambedkar's call for dignity, rights, and rational reform, turning 'Jalsa' and 'Shahiri' into platforms of political education. The landmark moment came with M. B. Chitnis's *'Yugayatra' (1955),* commissioned at Ambedkar's urging, performed before him, and restaged during the 1956 mass conversion in Nagpur. From then, Dalit theatre shifted decisively toward centering

Dalit protagonists, exposing caste violence, and dramatizing struggles for education, dignity, and rights.

Voices of Resistance: Post-Ambedkar Theatre

The decades following Ambedkar saw a flowering of Ambedkarite theatre. Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane *('Mrutyu Shala', 'Mukhavata'),* Suresh Meshram *('Ragging', 'Vietnam'),* Kamalakar Dahat ('Narabali', 'Mrityudin va Muktidin'), and Prof. Datta Bhagat *('Chakraview', 'Wata Palwata')* gave dramatic voice to structural critique. Writers like 'Daya Pawar *(Mumbai Nagari),* Pramanand Gajvi *('Ghatbhar pani', 'Kiravant', 'Tanmajori')*, Shrikrushna Raut *(Blind Show),* Texas Gaikwas *('Manvantar and 'Amhi Deshache Marekari'),* Rustam Achalkhamb, (Kaifiyat), Dadakant Dhanvijay *('Akinchan' and 'Vikalp')*, Ramnath Chavhan *(Sakshipuram)* and others expanded the repertoire with plays about water rights, temple entry, superstition, and caste violence.

In the 1980s, troupes like *Abhinav Kala Niketan*, led by playwright Dadakant Dhanvijay, energized communities through street plays and stage performances. Many artists who emerged from these movements went on to leave lasting impressions Sanjay and Vandana Jiwane with *Dalit Rangabhoomi*; Virendra Ganvir with *Bahujan Rangabhoomi*; Kewal and Pallavi Jiwantare with *Abhinav Kala Niketan*; and Ashok Jambhulkar, a retired radio announcer who also appeared in Marathi films. Others include Rajesh Dhabre, associated with *Abhinav Kala Niketan* and later an IRS officer through UPSC, Rajesh Sayare with *Prabuddha Rangabhoomi*, as well as Gautam Dhengre, Shital Dodke, and Vilas Thorat from Amravati. Together, these artists not only shaped Dalit-Bahujan theatre but continue to inspire new generations of performers.

In recent decades, Sanjay Jiwane has carried forward this legacy through theatre and film, producing *'Paidagir'* under his ne banner *"Buddhist Film Industry"* while continuing to train

young Ambedkarite artists. Other playwrights, actors, and producers Vandana Jiwane, Virendra Ganvir, Ashok Jambhulkar, Playwright Premkumar Ukey, and more have further professionalized the space. Ambedkarite theatre has also experimented with 'Mahanatya: large-scale, spectacular plays featuring 200+ actors, dramatizing Buddhist kings, reformers, and icons of resistance. Mahanatya 'Mahanayak Samrat Ashok' is one of such highly popular play.

From Stage to Screen: New Cultural Terrains

Dalit theatre today extends beyond the stage into cinema and digital media. Films like Nagraj Manjule's *'Fandry'*, Pa. Ranjith's *'Sairat'*, Shailesh Narwade's *'Jayanti'*, and Sanjay Jiwane's *'Paidagir'* unmask caste realities within everyday life, reaching audiences far beyond Maharashtra. Dalit young film makers felt their presence in short film naking as well, Prashant More's *'Ranjis'* and *'Udmashan'* 'Project Heartland' by Pratik Parmar, *'Battle of Bhima Koregaon'* by Somnath Waghmare, 'Gulsitaa' by Dadakant Dhanvijay and Nirmiti Jiwantare directed *'Aabaru'* got places in the film festivals. Documentaries like Somnath Waghmare's *'Chaityabhoomi'* and Jyoti Nisha's *'Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: Now and Then' (2023)* weave Ambedkarism into contemporary debates on caste and democracy. Alongside this, Dalit rap, protest songs, and digital activism on YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp have created 'counter-publics' where marginalized voices reclaim agency and spread Ambedkar's message.

Dalit theatre exemplifies Ambedkarism's cultural strategy: turning performance into pedagogy and resistance. By fusing folk idioms with modern dramaturgy, it democratizes art, making it both entertaining and politically didactic. The Dalit protagonist is no longer passive but assertive, rational, and resistant embodying Ambedkar's call to reject blind faith and embrace self-respect. From *'Bhajans' to 'Jalsa'*, *'Qawwali'*, 'Bheem-Geet', and now theatre and cinema, Dalit–

Ambedkarite cultural traditions transform every performance into a 'collective weapon of struggle'. They preserve memory, inspire dignity, and project Ambedkar's vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity across generations.

Digital Media: Ambedkarism in the Age of Communication

For decades, Dalit movements felt the absence of a dedicated media space that could articulate their concerns, narrate their struggles, and represent Ambedkarite perspectives. Mainstream media often ignored caste atrocities or filtered them through dominant-caste lenses, leaving Dalit voices unheard. In response, Ambedkarite activists and cultural leaders recognized the need for their own media platforms spaces where Ambedkarism could be discussed, live events broadcast, documentaries created, and community updates circulated.

The growth of 'digital technology and new career pathways in media' opened opportunities for Ambedkarite youth trained in journalism, editing, and digital production. Many established independent media houses, enabling them to present news with greater accuracy and empathy, document Ambedkarite heritage, and preserve the legacies of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar in contemporary formats.

Among the significant initiatives, *'Lord Buddha TV'*, launched in 2010 from Nagpur by Bhaiyaji Khairkar, created a channel for Dalit communities. Similarly, *'Awaaz India TV'*, founded by Aman Kamble, has become a vibrant platform with a strong presence on YouTube, offering daily news, live coverage, and community programs. These channels serve as 'cultural counter-publics', providing both visibility and solidarity to marginalized communities and continued with Ambedkarite discourse on digital platform.

Digital media represents the latest phase of Ambedkarite cultural assertion, extending Ambedkar's vision of education and organization into the virtual sphere. By creating autonomous media spaces, Dalits not only challenge the biases of mainstream journalism but also construct their own narratives of dignity, justice, and resistance. Platforms like Lord Buddha TV and Awaaz India TV embody Ambedkarism's insistence that communication itself is political- a means to resist silence, preserve memory, and mobilize collective action across generations and geographies.

Ambedkarite Voices in Literature and Culture:

The post-Ambedkarite period ignited a new phase of cultural and literary resistance where the pen became as powerful as protest. At the forefront was *'Asmitadarsh'*, founded in the academic space of Milind Mahavidyalaya, Aurangabad, under the guidance of Dr. Gangadhar Pantavne. Emerging in the mid-1960s, the magazine became a weapon of assertion for the first generation of Dalit writers, creating space for poetry, short stories, autobiographies, and plays that challenged caste hegemony. Works like P.I. Sonkamble's *'Athavaninche Pakshi',* serialized in *Asmitadarsh* before being published as a book, embodied the defiant spirit of Dalit literature breaking into mainstream Marathi readership.

From this nucleus, a larger wave of Ambedkarite cultural assertion unfolded. Magazines such as *'Bhim Patrika'* (L.R. Balley), *'Akrosh'* (Dalit Panthers), Raja Jadhav's 'Disha', B. Rangarao's *'Aakalan',* and *'Dalit Asmita'* (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies) became radical platforms for intellectual confrontation with Brahminical dominance. Later outlets like *'Krantikari Janata'* (Marathi/English), *Forward Press* (English, digital), and *'The Mooknayak'* (founded in 2021, inspired by Ambedkar's *'Muknayak'* of 1920) expanded the struggle into new media spaces. These were not passive

publications but living battlegrounds of ideas where Dalit identity was reasserted and defended.

Organizations, too, carried this cultural defiance forward. The *'Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Academy'* (est. 1984, New Delhi, by Babu Jagjiwan Ram) envisioned a pan-Indian movement uniting Dalit literature, art, and culture—fulfilling Ambedkar's dream of cultural liberation. *The 'Ambedkarite Literary Parishad'* amplified this energy, most notably hosting the Third Akhil Bharatiya Ambedkari Sahitya Sammelan in 1996, a gathering that symbolized Dalit literary power on the national stage. A new wave surged in 2014 with the '*Dr. Ambedkar Movement of Culture and Literature',* founded in Nagpur by Dalit-Ambedkarite writers and activists such as Dadakant Dhanvijay, Bhupesh Thulkar, Dr. Machchindra Chormare, Dr. Sudesh Bhowate, Rajan Waghmare, Sumedh Kamble, Savita Kamble, Kewal Jiwantare, Pallavi Jiwantare, and Ramesh Somkuwar. Through symposia and annual awards recognizing major Dalit creative works, this organization reaffirmed literature as a site of resistance, where creativity itself is defiance.

Beyond formal platforms, numerous informal literary circles, workshops, and forums especially in cities like Delhi have sustained the movement, producing a dynamic counter-culture. Together, these spaces demonstrate that Ambedkarite literature is not merely about storytelling; it is a cultural revolution, a refusal to be silenced, and a declaration that caste oppression can be dismantled through words as much as through political struggle.

Across *Jalasa, Bheem Geet, Qawwali, Ghazal, theatre, cinema, and digital platforms*, Ambedkarite cultural forms have become both 'tools of resistance and sources of livelihood'. They not only preserve memory and mobilize protest but also provide careers for singers, performers, writers, and media practitioners, turning culture itself into a sustainable mode of empowerment. Importantly, this cultural renaissance has

forged 'global solidarities'. Dalit struggles resonate with African-American movements against racism, indigenous assertions in the Americas, and the Burakumin movement in Japan. Such parallels highlight caste as part of a broader global grammar of exclusion, situating Ambedkarism within worldwide struggles for dignity and justice.

At the same time, Dalit political organizations from the *'Samata Sainik Dal* and *Independent Labour Party' AISCF, RPI to DS4, BAMCEF,* and *BSP* have witnessed cycles of rise, fragmentation, and decline. Yet, even where politics party falters, 'social awakening and Ambedkarite vision endure', carried forward through cultural work that reaches the grassroots. Thus, contemporary Ambedkarite cultural discourse transcends local protest. It has evolved into a global movement for 'liberty, equality, and fraternity', affirming Ambedkar's dream of *'Prabuddha Bharat'* while aligning with humanity's wider struggle against oppression.

Conclusion:

Ambedkarism is not simply a body of ideas but a recasting of struggle into story the lived transformation of oppression into organized resistance and emancipatory vision. From Dr. Ambedkar's formative years (1913) to his conversion to Buddhism (1956), his life itself became a series of phases through which Ambedkarism was forged: battles for education, legal reforms, political representation, social equality, and spiritual liberation. Each stage articulated core elements that remain foundational today: 'liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice; self-dignity, self-reliance, self-development; and the militant call to Educate, Agitate, Organize'.

Ambedkarism directly challenges the 'hegemonical superstructure of caste', exposing its economic, political, and cultural roots. In doing so, it insists on the emancipation of

women as an inseparable part of social transformation. Through 'constitutional and legal reforms', Ambedkar built institutional frameworks to protect the oppressed, while his radical turn to *'Navayana Buddhism'* envisioned a new ethical community one based not on ritual but on reason, morality, and compassion.

In intellectual and cultural domains, Ambedkarism continues to shape 'Dalit studies, historiography, and critical theory'. It provides a vantage point for critiquing both nationalist and subaltern historiographies, revealing how caste blindness in elite theories obscured indigenous articulations of marginality already advanced by Phule, Ambedkar, and others. Dalit literature, with its autobiographies, poetry, and theatre, expands Ambedkarism into narrative and performance, making lived experience a source of theory. In the 'post-Ambedkarite era', cultural assertion through *Jalasa, Bheem Geet, Qawwali, Ghazal, theatre, cinema, and digital platforms* has become a force of resistance and identity, projecting Ambedkarism as a cultural ethos rather than a closed doctrine.

Most importantly, contemporary Ambedkarite discourse has moved beyond local protest to embody a 'global vision'. Dalit struggles resonate with African-American resistance to racism, indigenous movements in the Americas, and the Burakumin struggle in Japan, affirming Ambedkar's dream of 'Prabuddha Bharat' as part of a wider human struggle against oppression. In this way, Ambedkarism survives as a living philosophy: a blueprint for dignity, a method of critique, and a global ethic of justice and equality for the twenty-first century.

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Two.
A Feminist Reading of the 'Therigatha': Voices of Early Buddhist Bhikhunis

Introduction

The history of women in India reflects a journey marked by the loss of freedom, transitioning from a matrilineal society to one dominated by patriarchy. This shift has significantly impacted women's individuality and mental well-being. Cultural practices and religious beliefs have often marginalized women, confining them within a rigid caste system. Patriarchy and male authority have been mechanisms to control women's sexuality, aiming to maintain the purity of kinship groups, which ultimately led to a strict caste division. Throughout history, women have played a crucial role in the evolution of caste politics. However, significant resistance to this oppression did not emerge until the Nineteenth Century, with the notable exceptions of the Buddhist Theris. These women not only expressed their struggles and injustices as individuals but also challenged patriarchal norms by joining the Buddha's Sangha, which empowered them to assert their identities. Buddha is often seen as a beacon of hope for these women, as he opposed the prevailing social inequalities and irrational religious practices of his time. His fair treatment of women and the opportunities he provided for them to acquire knowledge and recognition as equals to men drew many to Buddhism. The Therigatha, a collection of verses, captures the life experiences of contemporary Bhikkhunis who achieved enlightenment.

Their stories reveal both the struggles against male-dominated society and the fight against the control of women's sexuality in caste politics. This article aims to explore and analyze the historical subjugation of women through the lenses of indological and feminist studies, particularly focusing on the Therigatha to better understand the revolt of Buddhist Nuns through their narratives

Caste and Gender

The increasing levels of violence, discrimination, and atrocities against women in the post-independence era are indeed matters of great concern. Despite the establishment of democratic governments over the past seventy years, there has been a notable gap in ensuring that women receive their full constitutional rights. Regrettably, the failure to provide adequate security, equality, and opportunities for women is deeply rooted in cultural and religious ideologies, which often trap generations in outdated mindsets. While women contribute equally to their families' economic growth, their representation in social, political, and cultural arenas remains unsatisfactory. We also see a stark contrast in public interest; for instance, while men's cricket matches draw packed stadiums, women's matches often suffer from empty seats, reflecting broader societal attitudes. The systemic subordination of women in India is closely linked to the caste system and the complex social structure that is upheld by certain religious beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, the situation for women across various castes continues to deteriorate, with many facing conditions that place them in a status lower than even the Dalits. The process of degradation of women from the Vedic period is well explained by Gail Omvedt:

> "Vedic society was a male dominated one, like most nomadic pastoral societies. However, 'patriarchy' as such began only with the rise of the state and the

> beginning of class based exploitation and this happened most clearly in India around the middle of the first millennium BC. Women are associated with the household, and as childbirth begins to weigh them down they became tied to it, increasingly subordinated to the dominant patriarch in the emerging household-based kin system" (Omvedt 2003: 81)

Caste is a distinctive characteristic of Indian society that delineates the high and low status of individuals based on their birth. G. S. Ghure states, "Castes were groups with a well-developed life of their own, the membership whereof, unlike that of voluntary association and of class, was determined not by selection but by birth." (Ghure 2014: 2) Uma Chakravarty argues that religious texts are the foundation of the caste system, asserting that "the caste system comprises a series of hereditary groups or jatis characterized by hierarchy or gradations according to ritual status. The basis of inequality underlying the caste system in India is the application of evaluative-value based-standards in placing particular castes as high or low. These standards are rooted in Dharmashashtras, the religio-legal texts of the Hindus." (Chakravorty 2006: 10) In his article 'Caste in India', Dr. Ambedkar explains the emergence of caste in the nation, stating, "Prohibition or rather the absence of intermarriage-endogamy, to be concise- is the only one that can be called the essence of caste when rightly understood." (Moon: 1990: 8) Furthermore, he asserts that the Brahmins established the caste system to create superiority over other communities. Through his analysis of caste, he concludes that the creation and perpetuation of endogamy is synonymous with caste. He draws an analogy regarding surplus men and women and their status after becoming widowed. To maintain societal equilibrium, various 'means' were employed, such as celibacy, sannyasa, or child marriage (before puberty) for men, and the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres as the only option available to them. Thus, the caste

system enables men to navigate their circumstances, while women find themselves without a place in society following widowhood, leading to their inevitable demise. "This (sati) was forbidden initially to Brahmana wives and there are few cases if any references to lower caste women doing so. Possibly in many cases it was an assertion of higher caste status conveniently requiring only the women to burn." (Thapar 2014: 267). The custom of sati originated from Vedic texts, where a widow would lie upon her husband's funeral pyre and subsequently marry her husband's brother, remaining as a possession of the family. Sati was more prevalent among the higher castes, while Niyoga was favored among the lower castes. The caste system, as a closed class structure, was systematically established based on notions of purity and was later emulated by other lower classes. The mechanisms employed by the caste system were sufficient to subordinate and diminish the status of women in subsequent centuries. Many historians concur that during the time of Buddha, no caste system existed; however, certain communities were recognized as lower classes due to perceived impurities, such as the chandals. In the Buddha era, women were indeed regarded as subordinate to men, but they were not subjected to the severe degradation of status that occurred in later centuries.

Today, women are increasingly aware of their legal rights, identity, and societal status, thanks to feminist movements and constitutional rights. Extensive literature on women's issues, socialism, Marxist feminism, and Dalit feminist writings following Dr. Ambedkar's social awakenings have significantly altered societal perceptions of women. Nevertheless, a substantial number of women continue to be oppressed under the weight of patriarchy.

Controlling women sexuality as a 'means' of Caste:

If caste represents one side of the coin, then patriarchy constitutes the other side within Indian culture. It serves as a mechanism for regulating the caste system, establishing male dominance over females. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to adhere to the rules outlined in the Dharmashashtras, which dictate that an ideal wife should be devoted to her husband and the household. An exemplary wife is characterized by loyalty, steadfastness, and chastity. "This meant that the ideal of a wife was the one dancing at the will and command of the husband." (Gupta 1982: 59) Women are governed by men, as stated in Manusmriti, "a woman is under the surveillance of her father when unmarried, of her husband when married, and finally of her son when widowed." (Thapar 2014: 269) A pivotal question posed by Romila Thapar addresses why women are controlled by men, which is significant in the context of patriarchy: "where identity is determined by birth and is crucial as in caste, it is essential to know the parentage. In order to maintain the rules of the caste, it is essential to keep women under control. This is obvious because ultimately only a woman knows the biological father of her child. Caste and patriarchy are therefore inseparable." (Thapar 2014: 270) Contemporary issues such as honour killings and Love Jehad are manifestations of the earliest brutalities inflicted upon women as punishment for violating caste rules. Patriarchy extends further; to ensure the purity of the caste and prevent illicit mating, motherhood was subjected to monitoring through rituals. Feminist historian Uma Chakravarty noted, "motherhood itself was idealized and ritualized, and numerous rituals were prescribed, starting with marriage, going on to conception, and then to the birth of the 'son' to ensure safe delivery of the male child." (Chakravarty 2006: 69) Consequently, the glorification of mothers is evident in Manusmriti, as they were created for the purpose of childbirth and deemed worthy of worship. Leela Dube, while

examining puberty rituals across various castes in Orissa and Maharashtra, concludes that the underlying message of these rituals is unmistakable: the girl has transitioned into a sexual being, necessitating restrained behavior on her part, and highlighting the importance of protection and vigilance. These rituals are also performed to shield the girls from potential evils. Furthermore, Leela Dube asserts, "Restrained and controlled sexuality is a pre-requisite for socially sanctioned motherhood. The puberty ceremony notifies the members of the kin-group and the jati that the girl has reached an age where her marriage can be negotiated. The mechanisms that impose limits and restraints also sanctify and elevate sexuality." (Dube 2006: 13) It has been noted that stringent control over female sexuality was predominantly observed in higher castes; according to Uma Chakravarty, this is their justification for concepts of purity and impurity. Pre-pubertal marriages among upper caste girls were arranged to secure an untainted womb for the husband as his sexual property before she commenced menstruation, immediately followed by the garbhadharanam or consummation ceremony, which incorporates essential elements of caste purity.

To preserve caste purity, endogamy is (and has been) rigorously practiced within Indian Hindu culture, where marriages are essential for sustaining purity within the caste through the chastity of women. Religious texts regard women as instruments to fulfill these obligations, often at the expense of their freedom and self-respect. In contrast, men are largely exempt from these constraints, facing only minor penalties, which allows them the liberty to engage with other women, even if they are married. To safeguard the insular nature of caste, marriages are exalted, binding wives to their husbands for seven lifetimes, while divorce remains exceedingly complex and challenging, particularly for women, due to societal fears of imbalance. Gender discrimination in Indian society has been cultivated primarily to uphold the closed nature of caste; thus,

male dominance within a patriarchal framework emerges as a systematic mechanism, a byproduct of caste, aimed at regulating female sexuality through enforced endogamy.

Buddhism and Women

Pre-Buddha India was swiftly moving towards urbanization and the emergence of a new civilization. This transformation was influenced by the fourfold Varnashrama dharma, which was founded on principles of inequality and a stratified society. The subsequent centuries saw the decline of the Shudra, dalits, and women within this hierarchical framework. In contrast to this stratified society, the emergence of Buddha and his Sangha instilled hope for a more equitable society founded on liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. In Buddhism, women were regarded as equals and were believed to possess the potential to attain the ultimate Nibbana. Buddha's teachings were not rooted in dogma or belief in a deity or supernatural forces; rather, they focused on the exploration of human existence, addressing the sorrows and sufferings experienced by individuals across all social strata. His teachings emphasized human values, placing humanity at the core of his philosophy. He expressed strong opposition to the notion of Brahmin superiority and the inferiority of lower communities, stating: "By birth is not one an outcaste, by birth is not one Brahmin. By deeds is one an outcaste, by deeds is one a Brahmin" (Narada 1988: 308).

Recognizing the significance of women in society, Buddha contributed to elevating their status by founding the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Initially, he was hesitant to include them in the sangha; however, he was persuaded by Ananda. He demonstrated his respect for his foster mother, Mahaprajapati Gotami, by accepting her as the first Buddhist Nun, acknowledging her determination to join the sangha. Buddha's belief in women's potential for achievement, equal to that of men, is illustrated by the example of the King of Kosala. Upon hearing the news

of the birth of a daughter, he expressed displeasure, but Buddha reassured him with the words: "A female child, O lord of men, may prove to be an even better offspring than a male" (Narada 1988: 313). Buddha created a platform for women from all social strata, from the highest to the lowest, who had been denied their rights and respect, allowing them to live together and attain supreme bliss without discrimination. "When Buddha admitted Chandal women into the sangha, King Pasenjit, Brahmins, and Kshatriyas came to protest his actions. Buddha illustrated the futility of caste distinctions through simple reasoning" (Narasu 2002: 70). Buddha's notable disciples came from various social backgrounds: among the theras were Angulimala, the feared robber; Sunit, the scavenger; Sopaka, the dog-eater; Svati, the fisherman; Nanda, the cowherd; and Upali, the barber. Among the theris were Ambapali, the courtesan; Vimala, the daughter of a prostitute; Purna, the daughter of a slave woman; and Champa, the daughter of a hunter. The impact of Buddhism on contemporary women is highlighted by Romila Thapar, who noted that "Buddhist texts did not endorse sati, and widows were instead given the option to become nuns if they wished. Some votive inscriptions at Buddhist stupas record donations made by widows" (Thapar 2014: 286). Nowhere in Buddhist texts is it indicated that the Buddha distinguishes between his disciples. The Buddhist reformation, serving as a moral response to the corrupt state of society, necessitated careful management of relationships between the sexes. Consequently, the Buddha provided separate Vinaya for Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis. The esteemed status of great disciples was attained by Maudgalayana and Sariputta, and similarly, their counterparts Khema and Dhammadina achieved the same recognition. Women who were accepted into the Sangha enjoyed the freedom and equal opportunity to acquire knowledge and reach the ultimate goal of any renunciant, which is enlightenment. As a result, in such a liberal

environment, the Theris became bold and expressive in narrating their experiences without any reservations.

'Therigatha' Autobiographical Songs by Historic Buddhist Theris (Nuns)

The Therigatha is a significant volume within *the Tripitaka of Buddhism*, categorized under the *Khuddak Nikaya* (Minor Collection). This collection features the self-narratives of Theris (Nuns) who were contemporaries of the Buddha, and their accounts are included in the Pali canon alongside the teachings of the Buddha. The historical significance of this book is profound, as it represents one of the earliest collections of personal experiences narrated by women, marking it as the first inclusion of women's narratives. It would not be an exaggeration to refer to it as the initial voice advocating for women's liberty and a rebellion against patriarchy. Uma Chakravarty describes it as a quest for identity beyond domestic confines for women, tracing back to the sixth century B.C. The collection comprises 73 Theris who achieved supreme enlightenment, known as 'Arhathood,' and recounted approximately 522 'gathas,' detailing their journeys of transformation. Consequently, it reveals the personalities and socio-cultural backgrounds of these Theris. After attaining enlightenment, these Theris shared their experiences candidly. "In these poems, women expressed their joy at leaving behind the burdens of household chores and the harshness of their husbands. They also articulated the personal space they discovered upon entering the sangha and engaging in self-awareness." (Chakravarty 2006: 95) By embracing the teachings of the Buddha to comprehend their suffering and discover pathways to overcome it through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, they experienced a transition from their previous lives dominated by patriarchy to a present life of 'mukti,' or liberation from all desires and actions. Charles Hallisay, the English translator of the Therigatha, identified

these poems as central to Buddhist teachings on 'annicca,' or impermanence. These poetic narratives also highlight the socio-cultural injustices of their time, which subordinated women and confined them to roles centered on childbearing and household responsibilities. Professor Vimalakirti asserted, "The Theris featured in the *Therigatha* originate from various strata of contemporary society, which results in each experiencing distinct forms of suffering. They have all endured oppression from the social system; thus, their afflictions are solely attributable to these social structures." (Vimalakirti 2011: 19) These Theris, by overcoming their hardships, discovered optimism in their new lives as Bhikkhunis. In this role, they were liberated to acquire knowledge and were free from the oppressive traditions rooted in the Vedas. In appreciations to Therigatha Rhys Davids the great scholar of Pali Tripitaka and founder of Pali Text Society, London maintained,

> "a good many of these verses are not only beautiful in form but also gives evidence of a very high degree of mental self-culture which played so great a part in the Buddhist ideal of the perfect life. Many of the women who joined the order became distinguished for high intellectual attainments as well as for moral earnestness. Some women of acknowledged culture are represented not only as being the teacher of men and as expounding the deeper and subtler points of Dharma, but also as having attained the great peace which is the final result of intellectual illumination and moral earnestness." (Narasu 2002: 91)

Rejection of "Controlled Sexuality" of Women

The historic Buddhist Theris exemplify contemporary women who resisted patriarchy through renunciation. These Theris endured significant suffering during their family lives, facing insults from their husbands, which often led to their husbands abandoning the lawful home. In some instances,

husbands became renunciants, leaving their wives to manage the household and care for children and in-laws. They were bound to their husbands' families much like oxen are tethered to an oil pressing machine. These women found no respite from the burdens of family life and the oppressive caste system that enforced its unjust rules.

Theri Sumangalamata was born into a very impoverished family and married to an umbrella maker. She felt the anguish of being a woman from a low-income background, lacking dignity in society. Her husband also failed to show her respect and treated her poorly. To support her family, she had to pound paddy for rice, wearing meager and dirty clothes, while her husband regarded her as nothing more than an object. In her quest to escape these hardships, she joined the Buddha Sangha and ultimately attained enlightenment. She expresses her life from suffering of being controlled by husband as object to supreme bliss as:

> "Dear one who is quite freed, dear one who is quite freed
> I too am well-freed from pestle;
> My shameless husband, even the sunshade he worked under
> And my pot that stinks like a water snake all disgust" (Hallisay 2015: 21)

Theri Adhkashi hailed from a wealthy family. However, she was dissatisfied with the cultural emptiness she perceived in her parents' household. One day, she decided to leave her home and, for reasons unknown, found herself in prostitution. It was in this environment that she came to understand her worth as a human being, which had been shattered by her lascivious clients. Consequently, she chose to abandon her life in the illicit trade and joined the Buddha Sangha, leading to her transformation. The adhkashi's decision to enter the Sangha represented a rejection of the societal norms that had

controlled her through her sexuality, which had ultimately led her to prostitution.

> There is a reason why I was called "Half-kashi"
> As much as the country of kasha was worth
> My price was just the same
> While that was once my value
> After too many customers
> My worth was cut by half.
> By then I had enough
> Of what my body brought
> And wearied I turned away
> (Hallisay 2015: 23)

Theri Sona is an enlightened Bhikkhuni who was born and raised in a prominent family and later married into a family of equal standing. However, as a woman, she was compelled by her husband to bear ten sons. During a period when men were drawn to renunciation in pursuit of knowledge, her husband chose to become a Buddhist monk, leaving her to manage and support their ten sons and the household. The weight of such a large family overwhelmed her and stripped her of her dignity, prompting her to join the Sangha in her later years to seek peace and happiness: "It was after I gave birth to ten sons with this body / when I was weak and old that I approached a nun. (Hallisay 2015: 63)

Theri Sundari, the daughter of Sujat, recounted this life story. Sujat, having lost his son, fell into despair and subsequently became a monk, leaving behind his wife and daughter, Sundari. Both women were living their lives in solitude, but eventually, Sundari, frustrated with her passive existence, resolved to become a nun. Initially, her mother opposed her decision to join the monastic community, but Sundari was determined and entered the Sangha, where she encountered her father. In this context, Sujat questioned Vesseti, another nun, about her lack of mourning for all her deceased sons, despite her previous loud lamentations over the

loss of a few. Vessethi, known as the wife and mother of dying sons, was bound by the cycle of Samsara and her caste limitations; she wept because she feared having no one to care for her in her old age. However, her entry into the Sangha provided her with a solution for the future, leading her to find peace.

> My lady in the past people called you
> Someone who ate her dead sons
> Still you grieved hard for them day and night
> Today, Brahman lady, although you have eaten hundreds of children
> Why vessethi, don't you grieve so much? (Hallisay 2015: p 161)

Trauma from Male Domination

The prevalence of male dominance in modern society can be attributed to the patriarchal system. Within this framework, the status of women was diminished to that of a slave. Women were viewed merely as objects of pleasure, easily purchasable for a few gold coins. Unfortunately, women were often sold or bought for marriage by both families involved. Despite holding a high status within their parental families, they were treated as subordinates. In response to male domination, women of that era frequently chose to join the Bhikkhuni Sangha established by Buddha. Theri Anopama, a beautiful girl, was aptly named Anupama. During that time, it was customary for kings, wealthy families, and aristocrats to acquire wives for their sons by paying the gold coins demanded by the girl's parents. When she reached marriageable age, affluent families would approach her father with the intention of purchasing her for marriage. However, the discerning Anopama developed a distaste for family life and opted to become a Buddhist nun rather than endure the fate of being a bought wife to a wealthy man. In this regard, Anopama, unlike other Theris, exhibited the courage to reject entering into marital relations.

> I was born in a good family with great wealth and many possessions
> Good looking, I was Megha's very own daughter
> I lived up to my name which means "without compare"
> I was sought after by princes, coveted by sons of millionaires
> Until one sent my father a message: give me Anopama.
> I will give eight times what your daughter Anopama weighs in gold and silver as bride price" (Hallisay 2015: p 83)

The narration by Theri Isidasi is both dreadful and lamentable. She hails from a business family in Ujjain. At the appropriate age, as per societal norms, she was wed to a suitable partner. She was diligent in her responsibilities, sincere, and devoted to her in-laws and husband; however, her husband harbored disdain for her and began to belittle her. One day, he expelled her from their home. Subsequently, her father arranged for her to marry a wealthy man, but once again, she faced exploitation and humiliation, leading to her eventual departure from that household as well. Later, her father married her to a renunciant, bringing him into their home. Unfortunately, she could barely endure fifteen days with this husband before he abandoned her to return to his ascetic life. In recounting her past lives, she shared the sorrowful tale of a self who was consistently exploited; each husband sought to possess her yet failed to regard her as an individual. The concluding remarks of her narration highlight the manner in which a woman's sexuality was governed by patriarchal structures. "His son Giridasa observed that I had reached puberty / in my sixteenth year and he claimed me as his own" (Hallisay 2015: p 209)

Challenging the Caste Hierarchy

Abhaymata was originally named Padmavati; she was a prostitute (Ganika) in Ujjain. During that time, some women were compelled to enter prostitution and entertain clients through dance and singing. She gave birth to a son named Abhaya, who was the offspring of King Bimbisara of Magadh. Abhaya later became a Buddhist monk and provided teachings to his own mother. Inspired by his teachings, Abhayamata abandoned her profession and chose to become a nun, resisting the role of being an object of entertainment. The monk Abhaya addressed his mother after she took her vows as a nun:

> "Whether up from the sole of the foot, mother
> Or down from the top of the head
> Reflect on this body as filthy and foul smelling"
> (Hallisay 2015: 71)

Theri Punna was born into servitude in the household of Anathpindika, a devoted follower of Buddha. As a lay practitioner of Buddha's teachings, she reached the sotapanna stage. After she successfully converted a Brahmana to Buddha's faith, Anathpindika freed her from her servitude. She achieved enlightenment. According to tradition, a Brahmana was bathing in a river to cleanse himself of his sins. Observing this, Punna offered him advice based on the wisdom she had acquired from Buddha:

> Who told you that,
> Like a know-nothing speaking to a know-nothing,
> That one is freed from the fruits of an evil act
> By washing off in water?
> It is that frogs and turtles / Will go to heaven
> And so will water monitors and crocodiles,/ And anything that lives in water,
> As will killer of sheep and killer of pigs, / Fisherman and animal trappers,

> Thieves and executioners, / Everyone who habitually does evil?
> They are freed from the fruits of their evil acts /If these rivers can just carry away the evil already done?
> But these rivers might carry away all the good done too,
> You'll be beside yourself about that, / Aren't you afraid of that, Brahman,
> Each time you go down into the river?
> (Hallisay 2015: p 125)

The poem is not only narrates the punna's convincing power with the wisdom but it also unveil the stand of rationalism of Buddhism versus superstitions led by Brahmins of the time. The poem also could be taken as the rejection to illogical traditions of the time.

Nibbana the supreme Bliss of Peace and Liberty

Enlightenment, known as *Nibbana*, is regarded as the ultimate objective for all Buddhists; it signifies a release from craving. It represents the experience of supreme bliss and tranquility. In the Fire Sermon, the Buddha states, "The entire world is ablaze. What ignites this fire? It is kindled by the flames of lust, hatred, and delusion; by the fire of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair." (Narada 1988: p492) He asserts that the cessation of these fires constitutes Nibbana. All the Theris mentioned in the Therigatha endured significant suffering as women throughout their lives, facing various forms of subordination and oppression due to religious doctrines. In modern times, they sought refuge in the Buddha to combat the unjust socio-cultural exploitations. Through the teachings of the Buddha and the practice of Dhamma within the Sangha community, the Theris were able to establish their identity as independent individuals, free from male dominance.Sumangalamata who suffered as poor woman and later insulted by her husband, entered the Buddha Sngha. With the practice of Buddha's

teachings she achieved enlightenment by extinction of her anger and cravings. She narrates her blissful mind after enlightenment as:

> As I destroyed anger and the passion for sex
> I was reminded of the sound of bamboo being split
> I go to the foot of a tree and think, "Ah, happiness"
> And from within that happiness, I begin to meditate. (Hallisay 2015: p 21)

Theri Sona, who bore ten sons and endured the burdens of household responsibilities within a patriarchal family structure, waited a long time to find happiness in her life. When her husband chose to become a monk, she was compelled to support the family at the expense of her own joy. She arranged suitable marriages for her sons, yet she received neither kindness nor respect from them. Consequently, in a state of deep frustration, she resolved to enter the Sangha when there was no one left to care for her at home. Thus, Theri Sona, initially dependent on her husband, later found herself burdened by the responsibilities of her sons and daughters-in-law, leading her to make the decision to leave them. Entering the Sangha was a formidable challenge for her at such an advanced age, as she sought to attain the ultimate goal of enlightenment. With the supportive environment provided by the Bhikkhuni Sangha, she ultimately succeeded in achieving Nibbana, the highest state of bliss.

> I cultivated a state of mind
> That depends on nothing else and cannot be measured
> I become focused, collected
> I am free, and I will always be completely free. (Hallisay 2015: p 63)

Theri Uppalavanna belonged to a distinguished family and became a Bhikkhuni in her youth, as kings, businessmen, and aristocrats began sending her father marriage proposals

accompanied by gold coins, or threatening to abduct her if he refused. Uppalavanna was intelligent and developed a distaste for household life; thus, she was unwilling to marry under such circumstances and chose to become a renunciant. In this path, she achieved enlightenment and the supreme blessing of Nibbana. She recounted a tale of a mother and daughter who, driven by lust, both married her own son. Upon realizing the truth of their relationships, they felt remorse for their sinful actions. Each of them became Buddhist nuns, while the son took on the life of a monk. In her narration, Uppalavanna emphasized the negative consequences of desires and how one can distance themselves from such sins to attain the blessed state of Nibbana.

> The pleasures of sex are like swords and stakes
> The body, senses, and the mind
> Just the chopping block on which they cut
> What you call the delights of sexual pleasures
> Are no delights for me now. (Hallisay 2015: 121)

All Theris recounted their individual life experiences, with their past lives reflecting their domestic situations, whether in their parents' homes or in their husbands' households. These narratives capture our interest as they clearly highlight the discrimination faced by women in a patriarchal society. Their hardships varied, stemming from their different social strata. While many women had no choice but to endure the torture and injustice imposed by a male-dominated society, some, like these Theris, had the opportunity to become Bhikkhuni, allowing them to forge their true identities and attain supreme Nibbana. These Theris were esteemed disciples of the Buddha, recognized for their profound knowledge and comprehension of his teachings, and they assisted many other women in awakening. The Buddha was confident in women's potential to achieve Nibbana, and

many of them reached this blissful state. All the Theris featured in the Therigatha were enlightened women.

Conclusion

The contemporary time of Buddha advancing towards urbanization, started in the recent centuries. The Vedic culture was disseminating its rituals and traditions across various communities. During this period, women were not strictly bound by patriarchal norms. They enjoyed a degree of freedom to choose their own lifestyles, balancing household responsibilities with the lives of homeless nuns. However, women were still largely under the control of patriarchy, which confined them to domestic roles, including cooking, bearing children, and fulfilling obligations to their husbands and in-laws. The negative customs of the era were also documented in Buddhist texts, where beautiful women were forcibly taken for marriage and subsequently treated as objects. Those who resisted, especially when faced with multiple suitors, were often compelled to become ganikas, a form of sophisticated courtesans. Thanks to the teachings of Buddha, women found a glimmer of hope to establish their identities and embrace their womanhood by joining the Sangha, similar to the men of that time. Buddha's confidence in their abilities to attain supreme knowledge and Nibbana served as a significant morale booster. Not only did they become influential nuns, but they also educated many men who became their disciples. They achieved remarkable recognition, paralleling their male counterparts in the realm of knowledge and providing assistance to fellow women in the household. The era of Buddha marked a golden age in the history of the country for women, as they seized opportunities that came their way, viewing renunciation as a path to liberation from patriarchal oppression and male dominance. However, in the subsequent centuries, as Buddha predicted a decline in the influence of Buddhism after five hundred years, we observed a

deterioration in the status of women within families. The practice of sati became prevalent, and women were increasingly subjected to degradation, objectified in their roles of reproduction and domestic duties, akin to slaves.

The protagonist of the Therigatha, the Theris, made significant history by rebelling against the Vedic tradition, which sought to confine them within the confines of the idealized, objectified role of a wife. These Theris opposed the unjust social order throughout their lives as laypersons, but their resistance intensified once they became nuns and embraced the teachings of the Buddha. Although they hailed from various social strata, these Theris cohabited and supported one another in their pursuit of Nibbana. The accounts they provided in the Therigatha serve as a historical document of women's liberation and represent a milestone in the feminist movement, marking the first vocal expressions of women globally. Furthermore, these Theris not only rejected the 'Controlled Female Sexuality' orchestrated by the Dharmashastras but also dismissed the caste ideologies that perpetuated male dominance over them within a patriarchal framework.

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Three.
Forging of Identity in Valmiki's Joothan

Chaturvarna has structured Indian society into four distinct classes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Another classification divides people into savarnas and avarnas. The Shudras, or avarnas, occupy the lowest level within this social framework and have faced marginalization, exploitation, and mistreatment for centuries. Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy and social movement gave a voice to these overlooked communities, leading to the emergence of Dalit literature. This genre serves as a socio-historical and cultural testament to their struggles, reflecting their experiences in a society entrenched in caste discrimination.

Omprakash Valmiki was born in Barala, near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, and is part of the Valmiki community. Often referred to by various names such as Chuharas, Bhangis, Domes, Mehtars, and Chandals, Valmikis are regarded as untouchables. His autobiography, *"Joothan*," written in Hindi, encapsulates the hardships faced by the Valmiki community and is a poignant reflection of his quest for identity. Currently serving as a Class One officer at the Ordinance Factory in Dehradun, Valmiki's work has been translated into English by Arunprabha Mukherjee.

This autobiography highlights the pain and plight of the Valmikis while simultaneously representing an individual's journey toward understanding oneself. This paper intends to explore Omprakash Valmiki's social, academic, religious,

cultural, militant, economic, and political identities. It also emphasizes his activism and the evolution of his Dalit consciousness, linking his personal quest for identity to the broader struggle of his community. 'The autobiography as a genre is a search for identity, which begins due to feelings of alienation from one's surroundings." (Sodhi, 1999: 92)

The story of Dalits in India is one deeply intertwined with the harsh realities of untouchability and widespread discrimination rooted in caste, as well as the pervasive practice of slavery. Throughout history, they have faced the stripping away of their human dignity and have been subjected to exploitation due to their caste status. This often resulted in their exclusion from village life, forcing them into ghettos. After enduring such prolonged oppression, many Dalits found themselves disconnected from their sense of identity, leading to feelings of insecurity and alienation from the broader society. In this context, Dalit autobiographies serve as vital narratives of the community's struggles and resilience. One poignant example is *"Joothan"* by Omprakash Valmiki, which embodies a quest for reclaiming lost identity and exploring its origins. According to Erik Erikson, 'Identity', is a composite of one's sexuality, physical make up, vocation and belief system, involving the past, present and future. It is a synthesis of earlier identification.

> "Sense of identity" according to Erik Erikson is: "A sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and its means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with it is future as well as its history-or mythology". (Waghmare, 2001: 31)

The essence of self-identity is a fundamental aspect of personal growth and awareness. It embodies the inquiry of "Who am I?" However, for Dalits, this question often remains

unaddressed, resulting in an ongoing quest for a sense of identity.

Valmikis, also known as Bhangi, have long been positioned at the very bottom of the Indian social ladder. For generations, their roles revolved around carrying night soil, disposing of dead animals, and undertaking other similarly unpleasant tasks. In his autobiography, Omprakash poses several poignant questions: Does the act of scavenging define the identity of this community simply because it is their profession? Are they not deserving of the same human values as anyone else? From a young age, Omprakash endured discrimination and violence, experiences that left lasting scars. He felt isolated from his peers from as early as primary school, a sense of alienation that turned him into an introvert and significantly shaped his childhood. It's likely that many sensitive children from marginalized communities faced similar traumas. As he grew up, his quest for identity became a powerful symbol of the struggles faced by his community. Influences that shaped Omprakash's life included his parents, sister-in-law, and notable figures like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Gautam Buddha, and Mahatma Phule.

Establishing Identity

Identity formation is a gradual and ongoing journey. Our work environment and the impact of our social surroundings play a crucial role in shaping who we are. Erikson highlights that childhood is particularly vital in this process. Interestingly, many Dalit autobiographers pen their stories at a young age; for many, these autobiographies are their initial literary endeavors. Their writings capture a relentless pursuit of understanding and identity. This exploration can be categorized under various themes to trace the development of a Dalit writer's identity through different life stages.

Social Identity

Psychologist Henry Tajfel introduced the concept of Social Identity theory in 1978. According to this theory, a person's sense of self is shaped by social categorization. This means that individuals instinctively align themselves with certain groups while distancing from others, establishing a clear divide between 'in-groups' those with which one identifies and 'out-groups' those that one does not.

In India, caste plays a crucial role in shaping the collective psyche, influencing individual identities significantly. Dalits, in particular, have been marginalized, often forced to live on the outskirts of society under deplorable conditions. They face deprivation of rights and socio-economic advantages enjoyed by other castes, leading to a life marked by extreme poverty and numerous social stigmas. Among them, the Valmikis, a sub-caste, encounter even harsher realities than other groups deemed "untouchable."

Omprakash and his family, residing in Chuhara Basti, exemplify this struggle. They performed a range of labor for upper-caste families, including cleaning, agricultural work, general labor, and various menial jobs, often without compensation. Their contributions went largely unrecognized, and they endured humiliation through derogatory labels. In this community, addressing someone older often involved calling them 'Oe Chuhare,' while younger individuals or peers were referred to as 'abe Chuhare,' highlighting the pervasive disregard for their dignity.

In challenging circumstances, Omprakash embarked on his early education. His father, Chotanlal, was very mindful of the importance of education and went against the odds to ensure his son attended school. From a young age, Omprakash encountered various forms of exploitation. The headmaster, Kaliram, made him sweep the entire school premises and

denied him access to the classroom alongside his peers. In defiance, Omprakash boldly protested against this unfair treatment and displayed exceptional courage and commitment to his community, acting as a true leader and advocate.

Another significant moment in Omprakash's early life occurred when he witnessed his mother stand up against the indignity of accepting leftover food. One day, while she was collecting scraps, she faced disrespect from Sukhdev Singh Tyagi. Fueled by her self-respect and dignity, she refused to accept the age-old practice of caste discrimination. Rather than tolerate the insult, she dumped the entire basket of Joothan right then and there, responding to Tyagi with remarkable bravery. After that day, she never returned to his doorstep and instead chose to refuse *Joothan* altogether. This powerful act of defiance resonated with her son, who was present at the time, teaching him the vital lesson of standing up against injustice and humiliation. The strong social awareness displayed by Omprakash's parents was truly remarkable.

Another episode from the autobiography illustrates the hardships faced by Dalits in their quest for basic self-respect and social identity, especially when contrasted with upper-caste Hindus. In one particular instance, while Omprakash was preparing for his tenth-grade math exam, he was forced by Fauza Singh Tyagi to work in the fields, sowing sugarcane instead of studying. Despite his reluctance, Omprakash had no choice but to labor through the morning. When lunch time arrived, Fauza's mother brought food and, rather than handing the rotis to Omprakash directly, she disdainfully dropped them into his hands to avoid contact. This act of humiliation struck deep, especially for a boy raised in a family that valued dignity. In anger, he threw the rotis on the ground and ran home. Upon learning of this incident, Chatanlal, his father, nearly confronted Fauza but was stopped by Omprakash's mother.

The fallout from this event resonated throughout their community, prompting many to refuse unpaid labor. It ignited a spirit of resistance among the Dalits, uniting them against the prevailing caste injustices. Countless such insults had accumulated in the collective consciousness of the Dalit community, shaping their identities over time. Years later, when Omprakash learned of the tragic incident involving the Ganwai brothers in Pune, where upper-caste individuals had blinded them out of sheer caste hatred, he penned an article in Navbharat Times, voicing his protest. Each personal act of defiance became emblematic of a larger community struggle, fostering a stronger social identity for both individuals and the group. The themes of resistance, exploitation, and a reclaiming of dignity are woven throughout the narrative in Joothan.

Academic Identity:

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar championed the idea that education is essential for development, advocating for the motto "Educate, Agitate and Unite." Despite facing numerous challenges, Dalits held education in high regard. In his autobiography, Om Prakash Valmiki recounts the struggles he endured, reflecting the experiences of many in similar circumstances.

Valmiki faced ridicule from his classmates, who called him “Chuhare ke,” and he was denied access to the school’s hand pump for water. Teachers unjustly punished him regularly, yet he refused to be defeated. He endured the inhumane treatment, determined to pursue his studies in order to fulfill his father’s dream of uplifting their caste. His unwavering thirst for knowledge at such a young age was remarkable, showcasing his resilience, passion, and ambition. By the eighth grade, he was already exploring literature from the school library, diving into works by authors like Sarat Chandra, Premchand, and Rabindranath Tagore. This early exposure sparked his

awareness of Dalit issues and discrimination, igniting a desire for understanding and personal growth.

As noted earlier, one's environment and experiences shape individual identity, a point Erikson emphasizes by underscoring the significance of childhood in forming one's self-concept. Valmiki consistently prioritized his self-respect and dignity. On one occasion, to avoid the scrutiny of his peers, he approached his uncle not merely as a favor but out of a deep concern for his dignity and self-worth. "Chacha, let me pass the bus terminal crowd. It is the time school closes. If my classmates see me carrying this bundle, they will bug me in school."(Valmiki, 2003: 35)

When Omprakash completed his high school exams, his father hosted a grand feast for the entire basti to celebrate his achievement. This moment brought immense joy not just to their family, but to the whole community, as it was a triumph they could all share. Typically, members of the Tyagi caste would avoid visiting the homes of those from the Chuhara caste, yet Chamanlal Tyagi, a well-respected figure, broke this norm by coming to congratulate Valmiki and joining the feast.

Years later, while training as an apprentice at the Ordinance Factory in Dehradun, Omprakash traveled to Jabalpur, where he immersed himself in the works of acclaimed authors like Pasternak, Hemingway, Victor Hugo, and many others, including the complete works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kalidasa. These readings sparked his passion for drama, leading him to engage with the theatre scene in Bombay. He even established a drama group with his colleagues. His time in Jabalpur fostered significant personal growth and professional development, allowing him to excel in his career through hard work and talent. As he reflects on this journey, he says:

> "Jabalpur changed me. My speech pattern changed. My manners also changed...I took part in seminars and cultural functions. I became involved in Jabalpur's literary life. I also began to develop my own views on literature. I was more attracted to social realism than to aesthetic and formalist types of writings." (Valmiki, 2003: 85)

His dedication to social issues drove him to pen an article protesting the Ganwai brothers' incident, marking his introduction to Marathi Dalit literature. Valmiki's creative journey truly flourished in Chandrapur, where he was transferred for work. His thirteen years in this city shaped him into a multifaceted artist he emerged as a writer, dramatist, actor, director, and poet. This period of growth led him to become a prominent figure within the Hindi Literary Circle.

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a particular group or culture, profoundly influencing an individual's sense of self. While it shares similarities with the concept of identity position, it is not synonymous. The customs and traditions within a community are reflected in their culture, which also highlights the community's status and lifestyle. In his work "Joothan," Valmiki explores these cultural elements, focusing on two distinctive customs: Joothan and Salam, which offer insight into the rich tapestry of his experiences.

Joothan refers to the traditional practice of collecting leftover food in Uttar Pradesh, primarily associated with the Untouchables. Literally translating to scraps or remnants, joothan became a vital aspect of daily life for these communities, who often didn't prepare meals for themselves but relied on these leftovers for sustenance. Instead of receiving regular wages, they were commonly compensated with joothan or rough rotis made from coarser flour. During weddings, for example, members of the Chuhara community

would gather outside with large baskets to collect food remnants after guests had finished eating. This aspect of collecting joothan is poignantly captured in Mulk Raj Anand's influential novel, "Untouchables." In a bold move to reclaim her dignity and challenge this norm, Omprakash's mother chose to break away from this tradition.

Another tradition explored in "Joothan" is the 'Salam', a practice linked to marriage ceremonies within the Valmiki community. Typically, during such events, guests offer good wishes and gifts to the newly married couple. However, many upper-caste Hindus, such as the Tyagi portrayed in "Joothan," did not visit the Chuhara basti, leaving the bride's family to approach homeowners for presents and clothing. Oftentimes, these requests were met with rudeness and scorn, subjecting low-caste individuals to further humiliation. The author, even as a student, recognized the absurdity and injustice embedded in these customs.

Both 'Joothan' and 'Salam' reveal numerous empty traditions in Indian culture that were imposed upon the Dalit community to demean them. These practices symbolize the pain, humiliation, and poverty that this community faces, and the author argues that such customs serve as a conspiracy to keep Dalits trapped in a cycle of inferiority.

Religious Identity

The Valmiki community has a complex relationship with Hinduism. While their religious identity is associated with Hindu beliefs, in practice, they do not follow traditional Hindu customs. The Valmikis worship their own deities that are not found in Hindu scriptures. For instance, during Janmashtami, they honor Jahaspir or pay respect to the spirit instead of worshipping Lord Krishna. Similarly, during Diwali, the focus is on Mai Madaran rather than Goddess Laxmi. Their rituals

also differ significantly, including the practice of sacrificing pigs during worship.

Some scholars, like Bhagwan Das, have pointed out that the Chuharas' religion is referred to as Lalbegi, identifying another significant figure, Bala Shah Nuri, as Valmiki. Additionally, Professor Shymlal from Rajasthan, who is part of the same community, has indicated that they align with the Kabir Panthi sect. The Valmiki community has a priest known as a bhagat, who may belong to the community itself, contrasting with Hindu customs where only Brahmins are recognized as priests.

Omprakash Valmiki, an observant member of this community, has keenly noted the differences in the deities they worship and the rituals they perform throughout his life. Unlike Hindus, pigs hold a vital cultural significance for the Valmikis, and this distinct practice has often led to misunderstandings regarding their beliefs. Valmiki himself was not involved in family rituals, which caused his father to question his faith and wonder if he had converted to Christianity. As a prominent Dalit writer, Valmiki advocates for the philosophies of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, and Buddha.

Militant Identity

Oxford concise English Dictionary defines Militant as "Combative or aggressively active especially in support of a (usually political) cause". The social movement after Mahatma Phule, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and E.V. Periyar Ramaswami Naikar made Dalits conscious of their status. Dr. Ambedkar writes:

> "Very first we have to eradicate fear from our mind. We should be ready to fight fearlessly against oppressor for oppression. What is the fear for that? What you have to lose that you worried about? You must not afraid of the

> death. If you are fearless at this extent, then only you can resist the above exploitation". (Moon, 2002: 68-69)

In "Joothan," we see both overt and covert expressions of militancy within the community. A striking moment from the autobiography illustrates this when the author recounts an experience from his ninth grade. The young men in the basti collectively decided they would no longer work without compensation. At first, they hesitated to voice their refusal publicly, opting instead to make excuses or avoid the issue. Meanwhile, the older generation, burdened by a sense of inferiority ingrained over the years, felt trapped and hesitant to challenge the status quo.

However, as the Tagas recognized their diminishing control over the Dalits, something shifted. The younger men began to openly reject unpaid labor, which brought them into direct conflict with government officials. They faced harsh retaliation, including police harassment that aimed to shatter their spirit. Yet, this ordeal ultimately played a vital role in reshaping the mindset of individuals like Omprakash.

Another pivotal moment shared in "Joothan" occurs when Omprakash travels to Dehradun for his twelfth-grade examinations. During this time, a group of students protested against the mandatory inclusion of English as a subject. Omprakash took an active role, helping to create banners and signage for the demonstration. When a large procession departed from DAV College to voice their dissent, the police intervened aggressively. Tensions escalated, resulting in tragedy as one student lost his life and many others were injured. This event not only highlights the courageous spirit of the author but also serves as a testament to his militant identity, showcasing his resilience and defiance in the face of oppression.

Economic Identity

The economic identity of a person encompasses access to essential resources such as food, clothing, and shelter, along with sufficient financial means to invest in health and education, creating a comfortable lifestyle. The Valmiki community in India, however, continues to face significant challenges, remaining both economically and socially marginalized. Overall, they lack political representation and educational opportunities. Historically, their involvement in menial ancestral occupations, such as scavenging and cleaning latrines, has led to generations of hardship. As noted by Omprakash, members of this community labored extensively for the Tagas, a higher caste within Hindu society, yet were denied fair compensation for their efforts. He recounts numerous instances illustrating the systemic deprivation faced by the Valmikis. It was only after the establishment of India's constitution in 1950, which guaranteed equal fundamental rights for all citizens, that some transformative changes began to take place. "The reapers were helpless. Whatever they got, they took after protesting a bit. They kept fretting after coming back home, cursing the Tagas. But their protests died when confronted with hunger". (Valmiki, 2003: 08)

The writer powerfully recounts how the issue of an 'empty stomach' compelled them to submit to the demands of the Tagas. For cutting twenty-one sheaves of grain, they earned just one sheaf, which amounted to less than a kilo of grain. There were countless tasks, such as loading and unloading grains onto bullocks that had to be completed without any form of payment or grain in return. In his autobiography, Omprakash shares how his mother worked tirelessly, cleaning the homes and communal areas of eight to ten Taga families, with the help of his brothers and sister-in-law. Alongside this labor, they were responsible for removing cow dung from cowsheds and tackling many other menial jobs, receiving only

leftover food as compensation. Omprakash illustrates the grim nature of their financial situation; he never had new textbooks and was often seen in borrowed or hand-me-down clothes. Their circumstances began to improve after he secured a job in Dehradun, leading to career advancements that eventually provided him with a stable financial status and social standing.

In conclusion, *"Joothan"* unveils the gradual transformation of Omprakash Valmiki's identity while presenting a broader view of the Valmiki community's journey. This autobiography delves into the various facets of identity formation, both for Omprakash as an individual and for his community collectively. The quest for identity emerges as a fundamental struggle for Dalits in India, drawing parallels to the experiences of Black individuals in America. The book also highlights influential figures who shaped his formative years. Now an Officer in an Ordinance factory, Omprakash reflects on how his pursuit of identity has been intertwined with his community and education. He acknowledges the miraculous ways these elements have opened new paths in his life, allowing him to evolve into an admirable person.

Various other aspects, like some personalities, which influenced his tender mind. Omprakash is now an Officer in an Ordinance factory. His quest for identity has been forged in the matrix of his community and education. In this book he acknowledges how these proved to be miraculous in opening new avenues in his life and grow into a worthy human being.

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Four.
'Protest' in the Poetry of Jyoti Lanjewar

Poetry stands as one of the oldest forms of human expression. It serves as a remarkable medium for conveying emotions in a captivating manner. From the epic tales of ancient times to today's free verse, poetry has consistently articulated the feelings of the human heart across the ages. It has not only provided entertainment but also offered guidance to readers for centuries. The careful arrangement of words and rhythm enhances its expressive power, painting vivid images through subtle imagery. Poetry presents a truthful reflection of life, encompassing a vast array of subjects, experiences, and emotions. It resonates strongly during both joyous and painful times, evolving into a philosophy of life that critiques our existence and guides readers through various challenges. In this philosophical realm, the joy of poetry takes a backseat, while the pursuit of enlightenment for the reader becomes paramount. It also serves as a powerful voice for human values.

The experiences of pain, suffering, and the quest for freedom found their first expressions in the poetry of African Americans and Dalits in India. In fact, the roots of Dalit literature trace back to poetry. It has been said that poetry is uniquely suited to convey intense emotions and profound sensitivity. Dalit literature emerged in Maharashtra during the 1960s, driven by writers inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's revolutionary ideas and socio-political, cultural, and religious movements. These writers boldly challenged injustice and

oppression rooted in caste. This spirit of protest and the struggle for identity are vividly captured in Dalit poetry. In doing so, Dalit literature has posed a significant challenge to traditional literature in India's regional languages, rejecting conservative norms and establishing a new trend focused on life-oriented themes. It serves as a voice for those who have been denied basic human values those marginalized, oppressed, and cast aside by the rigid structures of *the Indian social hierarchy (Varna System)*. Prof Waman Nimbalkar says:

> "The heart rending pricks of untouchability in life, slavery, poverty, injustice, atrocities, helplessness, anger, rebellion, and a pure attitude based on introspection of dark, gloomy past and a desire to lead a bright life in present and future with humanistic, conscientious, moral, rationalistic attitude has made Dalit poetry thoughtful. It consider man as its nucleus and thinks of the all-round development of his life." (Nimbalkar 2006, 70)

The struggles of identity and the profound sufferings of humanity throughout the ages resonate deeply in the realm of protest poetry. This genre is enriched by Dalit awareness and a heightened social consciousness, making it stand out. Today, Dalit poetry in Marathi is flourishing, reaching an impressive level of maturity. It began with socially committed writers such as Narayan Surve, Keshav Meshram, Namdev Dhasal, Waman Nimbalkar, Daya Pawar, Dr. Yashvant Manohar, E.M. Shinde, Raja Dhale, Naresh Ingle, Arjun Dangak, Shashikant Lokhande, Tryambak Sakpale, Chokha Kamble, and others, who represent the first generation of writers in the Marathi language.

Additionally, a resilient community of Dalit women writers is emerging, featuring voices like Hira Bansode, Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar, Surekha Bhagat, Meena Gajbhiye, Mallika Amarshekh, and Pradnya Lokhande,etc. In the realm of Dalit

poetry, certain women, including Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar, wield a significant influence with their passionate and powerful expressions. Renowned in literary circles as Jyotitai, she embodies the voice of resilience and rebellion against the ingrained caste mentality that persists in Indian society. Dr. Lanjewar stands not just as a voice for the Dalit community, but also as a representative of Indian women as a whole.

Her notable works include three collections of poetry: '*Disha*', '*Shabdanile Abhal*', and '*Ajun Wadal Uthale Nahi*'. Recently, her daughter, Aparna Lanjewar Bose, translated some of her selected poems into English, culminating in the publication of *'Red Slogans on the Green Grass'*. The post-independence era has ushered in a new voice for women who had long been silenced. The Phule-Ambedkarite movement laid a vital foundation for Dalits, fostering an environment where thoughts can be expressed fearlessly through literature. As a Dalit woman writer, Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar embodies social consciousness and commitment in her work. Dr. V. S. Jog rightly says about her:

> "I feel she is a poetess of social commitment and an ardent follower of the meaningful transformation envisaged by Ambedkar whose role is unparalleled in history. Therefore it's quite natural that her poetry is full of fire." (Lanjewar, 2008: 18)

Dalit's Pains of injustice, sufferings of inhuman treatment and state of nowhere to go:

Dalits are the original inhabitants of this land, with a rich and illustrious past. Unfortunately, they were forced from their towns into ghettos, often enduring inhumane conditions or retreating to forests. Jyotabai, aware of her birth into a Dalit community stripped of fundamental human rights, powerfully opens her poem *"What for Where you Born?"* with a resolute tone:

What for Where you Born?
In this slovenly wasteland
Here all the promethean trees are felled
And the Lampposts-
Have long rust-cankered
The roads are dust besmeared.' (Lanjewar, 2008: 51)

For Jyotitai, the Indian soil resembles a wasteland, shaped by the rigid Indian social hierarchy that stifles the potential of Dalits and denies them the chance to thrive as fully realized human beings. In this societal landscape, the very structures in place seem designed to condemn a child to the status of a slave from birth. Through her poetry, Jyotitai boldly interrogated the foundations of Indian society and its injustices. The Nightingale Never Warbled:

What have these trees given us?
Nay...what did we receive?
How much was allowed to be taken?

In the same poem she further says:

Till date we only picked
The decayed litter of leaves
Never touched the blossoms and leaves (Lanjewar, 2008: 46)

In this land, the caste system has long held down the Dalits, denying them their rightful place and basic human dignity for centuries. Dalits deserve the same natural rights and values as everyone else, yet circumstances of birth have placed them in a marginalized community. Jyoti Lanjewar, known as Jyotitai, feels a deep sadness when she observes the plight of the Indian mother. Though the concept of motherhood is revered in classical Indian literature, it often goes hand in hand with neglect and oppression. In her powerful poem, *"Mother of This Motherland,*" Jyotitai poignantly reflects on the dualities of the Indian mother archetype:

Mother...
You are the root culture of this land

Yet your sojourn the periphery
You've sweated to raise the golden
Grains-
Yet this land has kept you undernourished
You are the mother of this land
Then why is this land deficient for you?' (Lanjewar, 2008: 39-40))

Mother in Jyotitai's poetry represents the essence of the Indian woman, a bearer of the nation's future. Yet, this woman endures the harsh realities of rape, insult, abuse, and malnutrition. Her worth is diminished, often likened to the lowly status of a Dalit in a rigid social hierarchy that recognizes four Varna. Within this system, Dalits are marginalized and women, unfortunately, occupy an even lower status, existing almost as if they are invisible. The poetry of Jyotitai brings to light the dire situation of women, caught in a web of helplessness and despair.

Jyotitai's language is strikingly communicative and accessible. She possesses an exceptional talent for crafting vivid word images. Her nuanced use of natural elements allows her to convey deep emotions with precision. Each carefully chosen word serves as an outlet for her innermost thoughts. A prime example of her concise yet powerful expression is found in her poem *"Alternative,"* which exemplifies her remarkable ability to communicate complex feelings in a succinct manner.

Do my tears have all the wetness?
To drench the parched earth?
Even the clouds when suffocated
Know to scream and react
The lightning too can be made
But...
For me Out of all this
There's nothing
As...alternative. (Lanjewar, 2008: 44)

Attitude of protest toward injustice and suppression:

Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar's poetry encompasses a rich tapestry of themes that resonate deeply with the struggles of women in India. Her verses vividly express the anguish of broken spirits, the pain felt by mothers, a profound social commitment, a quest for identity, and a fierce stand against injustice. At its core, Dalit literature serves as a powerful voice of protest, challenging the traditional narratives that symbolize subjugation and oppression. This theme resonates strongly in Jyoti Lanjewar's work, where her fierce opposition to injustice and oppression shines through. Her poetic voice is undeniably rebellious, shaped by Dr. Ambedkar's revolutionary ideas and the essence of Dalit consciousness. In her poem *"Sting,"* the protagonist embodies a strong, defiant spirit, resolutely choosing to shed the chains of subservience and reclaim her identity.

> How long must I endure the venomous
> sting?
> How long must I chop my own wings?
> Who has tethered my legs thus?
> Who has ruined my mad hopes?
> (Lanjewar, 2008: 61)

For thousands of years Dalits endured injustice silently, but now they come to know that this conspiracy of upper castes. This oppression crosses all the limits of tolerance, therefore Jyotitai's protagonist further says:

> Planting pretty delicate promises
> The one who have been
> Blotted...burgled...
> Bilked...becharmed...
> Better still...for those who
> Broke the umbilical cord
> Only to become a man. (Lanjewar, 2008: 61-62)

These lines reveal the essence of true Dalit consciousness, which is a fundamental aspect of Dalit literature. This consciousness reflects an awareness of human values, emphasizing the right to live with dignity. It advocates for freedom within political, social, economic, and cultural contexts. Dr. Ambedkar's movement for social change serves as a powerful force for the Dalit community, instilling courage to confront challenges. This inspiring strength is evident in Jyotitai's poem, "*I Have Lifted My Hands":*

I have lifted my hands
Assimilating complete darkness
Transcending bruises- bearing the cross
I swear by the oozing blood
Of Eklavya's finger
Here in the threshold of being
In the beastly folds of furtive sighs-
Transgressing the limits of limitations
I have the potentials now
To bear the weight of the sky
Let it fall on is will...anytime...?
(Lanjewar, 2008: 67)

The portrayal of the mythic character Eklavya amplifies the intensity of protest in this context. Dalit literature vehemently condemns the injustice inflicted upon Eklavya by Guru Dronacharya. The imagery of Eklavya's bloodied finger serves as a powerful reminder for the Dalit community to stand firm in their fight for rights. This fervent yearning is vividly articulated in the poem. The poem '*Red Slogans on the Green Grass'* powerfully encapsulates an aggressive protest against such injustices.

Don't replenish robes for the body
But the hands that dismantle them
Dissever them from their stock
Don't let history repeat

For a new Mahabharata
Else we would also have to write-
Red slogans on the green grass
And blaze like the smouldering fire-
Seizingall sides
On your part...you can return
The title accorded to you
"Messih of poor and oppressed"
And to hearts content
Let become- Another Kurukshetra of this earth.
(Lanjewar, 2008: 63)

The Mahabharata is primarily recognized for the epic clash between the Pandavas and Kauravas, but it also exposes the deep injustices faced by figures like Eklavya, Karna, and Draupadi. The Dalit consciousness will not stand idle in the face of such wrongs. If injustices are perpetuated against Dalits again, they will not hesitate to rise up, ready to defend their rights and dignity, reminiscent of the spirit of Kurukshetra.

Jyotitai's poetry champions social transformation. Dalit poetry advocates for liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice within Indian society. It is not a voice of hatred, but rather a message of friendship and the collective well-being of all. Jyotirao's work reflects a profound optimism for positive change in the Indian mindset, evident in her *poem "Life Long Kinship".*

"Nobody can snatch the songs
From the enunciated lips of future
I am the living allegory
Of the annihilating sun
That burns all darkness
To rise
Ill smolder the mettle flames
And when the hamlets burn-
I will lend torches in every hand."

(Lanjewar, 2008: 29)

Jyotitai, in her powerful expression, conveys the essence of Buddha's teaching, *"Atta Deepa Bhava*." She holds a firm belief that the future holds great promise. With keen awareness of the latent potential within the Dalit community, she draws an enlightening allegory, likening herself to the sun that, despite being temporarily obscured by darkness, will ultimately dispel it. Just as the sun triumphs over shadows, she envisions a time when Dalits will rise and reclaim their identities, shaking off the shackles of oppression. In the final lines of this stanza, the protagonist radiates courage and conviction, recognizing her capacity to lead her community forward. The declaration, "I will lend torches in every hand," reflects the transformative power of Dr. Ambedkar's revolutionary ideas, igniting a spirit of courage among Dalits.

In conclusion, Dalit literature serves as a vibrant reflection of life, encapsulating the experiences of Dalits across various genres. It first emerged poignantly in the form of poetry, presenting an authentic portrayal of life's myriad facets. This genre not only philosophizes life but also critiques it, offering readers timeless guidance. When poetry embodies life's philosophy, the pursuit of enjoyment becomes secondary to the enlightenment it provides. It also stands as a strong advocate for human values. Dalit poetry articulates the anguish and adversities faced by Dalits while simultaneously advocating for social transformation, drawing inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's empowering thoughts.

One of the prominent figures who contribute to Dalit literature with deep awareness and genuine experiences is Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar. Her work, as a woman, traverses a vast array of themes. Her poetry emerges as a voice of rebellion against the rigid Varna system, illustrating the injustices, suffering, and marginalization endured by Dalits. The core of her poetic expression is rooted in protest against oppression,

exemplifying a rebellious spirit. Dr. Ambedkar's revolutionary ideologies and the consciousness of Dalit identity amplify the rebellious nature of her work. As a Dalit thinker, writer, and feminist advocate, her poems serve as a powerful platform for Indian women, voicing their quest for freedom. She delicately yet assertively portrays the essence of Indian womanhood, boldly challenging injustice and amplifying the realities of Dalit life.

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Five.
From Pain to Protest: The Aesthetics and Praxis of Dalit Theatre in India

Pre-Ambedkarite Dalit Theatre:

Dalit theatre occupies a significant place within the broader landscape of Dalit literature, drawing its philosophical foundations from the Buddha–Phule–Ambedkar movement. To trace its lineage, one must apply the same parameters of Dalit consciousness that have shaped other literary forms. The earliest milestones often cited include Mahatma Jotiba Phule's *'Tritiya Ratna'* (1855) and M. B. Chitnis's *'Yugyatra' (1955)*. The pre- Ambedkarite Dalit theatrical tradition, therefore, takes its beginning from the Santyashodhak Movement initiated by Mahatma Phule. Alongside these written works, popular folk performing arts such as 'Tamasha' and 'Jalsa' which later developed into Ambedkarite Jalsa played a crucial role in cultivating a distinct Dalit theatrical tradition. The aesthetics of protest, rejection, and acceptance, central to Dalit literature, serve as the foundation of Dalit theatre as well.

When examining the production of Dalit plays prior to the organized Dalit movement under Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's leadership, certain limitations become apparent. These early plays often lacked the essential consciousness central to Dalit aesthetics. Between 1855 and 1955, only a handful of mainstream plays addressed Dalit issues. While Dalit

characters occasionally appeared on stage, they were seldom the subject matter; instead, they were often reduced to supporting roles designed primarily for audience entertainment. As a result, such plays failed to do justice to the lived realities of Dalits, whose identity was historically diminished under the caste system.

Dalit communities did not have access to or engagement with the "sophisticated theatre" enjoyed by upper-caste audiences. Instead, they gravitated toward *'Tamasha'* and *'Jalsa'*, performances that resonated with them due to their use of local dialects, often drawn from rural life or Dalit ghettos (in Marathi, *'Gavkusabaheril'*, meaning "from the margins of the village"). Indeed, communities such as the Mahars and Mangs had long traditions of folk arts, including *'Tamasha'*, *'Gondhal'*, and *'Dandar'*. This cultural association contributed to the neglect of these forms by the mainstream literary movement. In examining the cultural roots of Dalit theatre, Dr. Yogendra Meshram highlights the centrality of folk traditions such as 'Shahiri' and 'Lavani'. In his book *'Dalit Literature: Origin and Development'*, Meshram argues that these performative traditions were instrumental in shaping the theatrical consciousness of Dalit communities. As he notes: "Shahiri and Lavani could be classified as the dramatic forms, because in Shahiri dialogue and acting is essentially involved. Dialogic debates and question-answers are part of Lavani. In this perspectives it seems Dalit Theater must have its origin in Shairi and Lavani." Meshram's observation situates Dalit theatre not merely as a derivative of mainstream Marathi drama but as an extension of indigenous folk performance practices that foreground dialogue, debate, and performative resistance. By recognizing *'Shahiri'* and *'Lavani'* as proto-theatrical forms, he underscores how Dalit theatre emerged organically from cultural traditions rooted in oral performance, collective participation, and social critique.

As it is clear from the above discussion, the early theatrical expressions of Dalit communities were deeply rooted in popular folk traditions such as *'Tamasha'* and *'Lavani'*. However, these art forms were historically stigmatized and dismissed by upper-caste society. As Prof. Waman Nimbalkar points out: "Due to rise of Marathi drama on stage, tamasha was considered low and unrespectable as it was presented by people from the lower classes of the society. The dramatists and spectators demonstrated the Casteist attitude. To prevent and watch a drama was considered respectable whereas tamasha was disrespectful" (Nimbalkar, 2006: 149). This observation highlights how caste prejudice shaped cultural hierarchies, relegating folk-based performance traditions to the margins. *'Tamasha'* and *'Lavani'*, despite their popularity among Dalit and rural audiences, were denied legitimacy within the mainstream theatrical canon. It was only in the democratic atmosphere that followed independence that these forms began to receive wider recognition and critical reassessment.

Historical accounts suggest that during the era of Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar, Dalit communities in Mumbai, particularly the Mahars, staged plays within their colonies. One noteworthy example was Moreshwar Tambe's *'Maharachi Sun'* (1920), which explored the theme of inter-caste marriage. Bold for its time, the play was staged by members of the Mahar community despite unfavorable social conditions. Several such plays emerged in local spaces, though they had yet to embody Ambedkar's emancipatory philosophy. In the 1920s and 1930s, Dalit playwrights like Kisan Fahuji Bansode and Kerubua Gaikwad popularized *'Jalsa-based plays'*. This was the time when *Vagnatya* (a small dramatic performance within the Tamasha) and Prahasane (In Marathi theatre it refers to comedic plays or a type of farce) were popular and adopted within the broader *Tamasha* presentation by Dalit artists. "Based on Tamasha and contemporary folk forms like Vagnatya and Prahasane, Kisan Faguji Bansode is considered

as the founder of Dalit plays."(Meshram, 1998: 235) Among the pioneering figures of early Dalit theatre, Kisan Fahuji Bansode (K. F. Bansode) holds a prominent place. His play 'Sant Chokhamela' (1924) marked a significant intervention by foregrounding a Dalit saint within a theatrical framework. In addition, Bansode composed several scripts for '*Tamasha'*, including *'Eka Sadhuchi Fajiti'*, *'Partantra Vimochan'*, and *'Sanatan Dharmacha Pancharangi Tamasha'*, each of which employed popular performance idioms to communicate social critique. Kerubua Gaikwad likewise made important contributions through his '*Vagnatyas'*, such as *'Shalecha Plot'* (Plot of a School), 'Quarrel of Husband and Wife', and *'Recruiting Plot'*, which captured the attention of contemporary audiences. Beyond his creative output, Gaikwad also institutionalized cultural activism by founding the '*Ashprushya Satyarth Prakashk Jalasa' in 1940*. Through this platform, he initiated programs aimed at Dalit social and cultural awakening, thereby transforming performance into a medium of collective consciousness and resistance.

Annabhau Sathe-a prominent Dalit 'Shahir', novelist, playwright, and member of the communist movement who later shifted to Ambedkarite movement towards the end of his life made a notable contribution in the growth of Dalit theatre with his prominent play *'Inamdar' (1955).* The play portrayed the struggles of a Dalit workers in the new industrial set up in India and quickly became popular. However, as Dr. Ishwar Nandpure notes in his book '*Dalit Plays and Theatre'* (Marathi), "the ideological grounding of these plays was limited. Dalit lives were sketched through their Dalitness attached with their birth. They were inspired through the mainstream dramatic idealism but they were not based on the philosophy and vision of Ambedkarism. In that case unanimously Dalit writers and critic found all these plays were not reach the height of 'Tritiya Ratna' of Mahatma Phule" (Nandpure, 1997: 22). Thus, while early Dalit theatre represented important steps toward

articulating a distinct cultural identity, it was only with the rise of Ambedkarite consciousness that it gained a strong philosophical and emancipatory foundation.

Around the same period, another towering figure emerged in the cultural landscape of the Ambedkarite movement Shahir Wamandada Kardak (1922–2004). He became one of the most influential voices within the *'Ambedkarite Jalsa"* tradition, sustaining his artistic and political work for several decades. Through his poetry, 'shahiri' (folk performance tradition of Maharashtra), and tireless involvement in Ambedkarite gatherings, Kardak gave artistic expression to the political aspirations of Dalits and articulated a vision of social transformation. Kardak's performances were marked by their high-pitched, emotionally charged delivery, a style that not only heightened the dramatic effect but also resonated deeply with the audiences who often belonged to the oppressed communities he sought to awaken. His songs consistently centered on the casteless ideals of the Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar, emphasizing equality, dignity, and fraternity as the cornerstones of a just society. By invoking these figures, Kardak did not merely perform; he wove together a lineage of resistance that connected ancient Buddhist egalitarianism, the radical anti-caste reforms of Phule, and the emancipatory politics of Ambedkar.

Through his cultural troupe, *'Chandroday Natya Mandal',* Kardak traveled extensively across Maharashtra, reaching rural as well as urban audiences. His performances functioned as both cultural education and political mobilization, serving to awaken Dalit consciousness at a time when structural oppression and caste violence remained deeply entrenched. In this way, Kardak's artistry transcended mere entertainment; it became a pedagogical tool of resistance, reinforcing the ideological foundations of the Ambedkarite movement. Kardak's enduring legacy lies in his ability to transform the

'Jalsa' from a site of folk entertainment into a powerful medium of political pedagogy. His songs continue to echo in the collective memory of Dalit communities, symbolizing both protest and hope. By combining the oral traditions of Maharashtra with Ambedkarite thought, he ensured that the message of equality and resistance reached the masses in a language and form that was both accessible and emotionally stirring.

Until 1955, Dalit theatre had not yet witnessed the emergence of a Dalit protagonist on stage. Dr. Nandpure, in his seminal work, records that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explicitly instructed M. B. Chitnis to compose plays addressing the lived realities and struggles of Dalits. One of the most notable outcomes of this directive was the play 'Yugayatra', performed by the Dalit theatre group 'Bodhimandal' on 20 November 1955. Despite serious health concerns, both Dr. Ambedkar and his wife, Maisaheb Savitatai Ambedkar, attended and witnessed the entire performance a testament to the significance of this cultural intervention in Ambedkar's broader emancipatory vision. The impact of 'Yugayatra' extended beyond its initial staging. It was later performed on the eve of the historic conversion movement in Nagpur in 1956, an event that symbolized a radical rupture with the caste order. Remarkably, the play was witnessed by more than six million people, making it not only a theatrical production but also a socio-political phenomenon.

Structurally, the play unfolds as a sweeping historical narrative that charts the trajectory of caste oppression and resistance across different epochs. It begins with the 'Ramayana' episode of 'Shambuka', a Dalit ascetic executed for transgressing caste boundaries; a moment that symbolizes the violent exclusion of Dalits from the spiritual and social order of ancient India. The narrative then transitions to the ethical teachings of the Buddha, represented through historical figures

such as Sujata and Upali, who embody values of compassion, dignity, and spiritual equality. This segment underscores Buddhism's role as a counterpoint to Brahmanical dominance, offering an alternative vision of human fellowship. The play subsequently portrays the oppressive impact of 'Manu's law', depicting a society where individuals are stripped of identity and dignity under the rigid framework of caste hierarchy. From there, the narrative moves into the 'medieval Bhakti tradition', engaging with the egalitarian teachings of saints while simultaneously highlighting the discrimination endured by figures such as 'Sant Chokhamela', whose devotion to Lord Vithoba did not shield him from caste-based marginalization. These scenes emphasize the paradox of spiritual equality preached within the Bhakti movement yet denied in practice to Dalit devotees. The final movement of the play culminates in the modern emancipatory struggles led by Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, situating Dalit resistance within the broader history of anti-caste reform and social justice. By tracing this historical arc, the play not only dramatizes the systemic oppression of Dalits but also foregrounds the persistent counter-traditions of resistance, equality, and moral vision that challenged caste across centuries. In doing so, the performance functions as both cultural historiography and political pedagogy. It reclaims Dalit presence within history while constructing a continuous lineage of struggle one that bridges myth, religion, and modern politics to assert the inevitability of Dalit emancipation. Through this narrative, 'Yugayatra' dramatized the agonies of Dalit existence, laying bare the violence of caste and the deep wounds of untouchability.

More importantly, the play inaugurated a new trajectory for Dalit theatre. By embedding the intellectual legacies of the Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar within the aesthetic fabric of performance, 'Yugayatra' provided a blueprint for future Dalit playwrights. It established protest, rejection of caste

oppression, and the affirmation of Dalit identity as the central thematic foundations of Dalit dramaturgy. In doing so, the play transformed theatre into both a cultural weapon and a medium of collective memory, ensuring that the struggles and aspirations of Dalits were inscribed onto the public stage.

The "*pre-Ambedkarite Dalit theatrical movement"* can be seen as a crucial experimental phase in the evolution of Dalit cultural expression. In its early stages, the movement drew heavily on traditional folk forms such as 'Tamasha', which were dialogic, musical, and oriented toward popular entertainment. However, Dalit theatre practitioners gradually transformed these forms, stripping away their lighter, purely entertaining elements in order to foreground themes of social critique and intellectual awakening. This deliberate reorientation marked an important departure from the conventional role of folk performance, redefining theatre as a vehicle for consciousness-raising rather than escapist amusement. Key figures such as K. F. Bansode, Kerubua Gaikwad, Wamandada Kardak, and Annabhau Sathe played a pivotal role in shaping this new trajectory. Alongside them, theatre artists like Haribhau Wadgaokar, Janabaji Dongre, and Namdeo Whatkar contributed to the consolidation of a distinctly Dalit theatrical tradition through Shahiri. These artists not only expanded the possibilities of performance but also infused drama with political urgency and cultural resistance.

Thematically, this emergent Dalit theatre became deeply interwoven with the intellectual and ethical legacies of 'Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar'. By aligning their artistic work with these transformative philosophies, the playwrights and performers ensured that the stage became a space where Dalit struggles, aspirations, and critiques of caste oppression were articulated in compelling and accessible forms. The movement thus represented more than a shift in artistic practice; it was

part of a broader project of cultural reclamation and social reform.

In retrospect, the pre-Ambedkarite Dalit theatrical movement must be understood not merely as an artistic experiment but as a foundational step in the development of modern Dalit theatre. By blending folk traditions with radical social thought, these early playwrights and performers created a model of cultural production that was inseparable from the politics of emancipation. Their efforts paved the way for later, more explicitly Ambedkarite theatrical interventions, ensuring that performance art became a critical instrument in the struggle against caste and in the cultivation of Dalit consciousness.

Post Ambedkarite Dalit Theatre:

In the aftermath of *'Yugayatra'*, Dalit drama continued to progress at a measured pace, but the following decades witnessed the emergence of new intellectual voices who sought to reshape theatre through the lens of Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision. Among these figures, Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane stands out as a key architect of this transition. As a leading force of the *'Ashmitadarsh'* literary movement, Pantavane nurtured a wide spectrum of Dalit literary expression through both the journal 'Asmitadarsh' and its annual gatherings of Dalit writers. His early play *'Manuskiche Band' ('The Rebellion of Humanism'*, 1957) signaled the beginning of a fresh phase in Dalit drama, one that blended artistic experimentation with political and philosophical engagement.

This period also saw a range of theatrical productions that collectively marked the transition of Dalit drama from folk-based forms such as *'Vagnatya'* and '*Shahiri*' to fully developed stage plays centering Dalit protagonists and experiences. For instance, Namdeo Whatkar's *'Dag'* (A stigma) explored the anguish of a dancer within the *'Tamasha'* tradition, exposing

how caste and gender hierarchies intersected within popular entertainment. Similarly, Karande Guruji's *'Navi Wat'* ('New Ways') envisioned pathways toward social renewal, while Shri Gudadhe's *'Buddham Sharanam Gachchami'* turned explicitly to Buddhist philosophy as a resource for spiritual and social liberation.

Other plays further expanded the thematic scope of Dalit drama. Ashok Ahire's *'Samatecha Vijay' (Victory of Equality)* dramatized the triumph of equality, while Khushal Kamble's *'Gramrakshash' (A Rural Evil)* interrogated the entrenched structures of oppression within rural society. Baburao Gaikwad's *'Nat' ('Relation'),* Dr. Madhukar Ashtikar's *'Ghat Vajate tithe Pahat'* based on the problem of untouchability, and Sugandhabai Shende's *'Kadu Karli God Jhali' (Bitter guard becomes sweet, 1968)*, on the other hand, grappled with the complexities of social ties within a caste-ridden order. Together, these works reflect not only the thematic diversity of Dalit theatre during this transitional phase but also its shared commitment to reimagining the Dalit self as central, heroic, and dignified. Notably, M.N. Wankhede organized a one act play competition in 1969 proved crucial when Avinash Dolas's play *'Ahuti' (Sacrifice)* was staged and received overwhelming response from both critic and audience.

This corpus of plays highlights how the theatrical imagination of the time was deeply intertwined with the intellectual currents of the Ambedkarite movement. By moving away from performative traditions that foregrounded satire, music, or spectacle, these playwrights sought to establish theatre as a space of critical reflection, social pedagogy, and political assertion. In doing so, they laid the groundwork for a 'modern Dalit dramaturgy' that was firmly rooted in Ambedkarite thought, yet experimental in form and expansive in scope.

In the trajectory of Dalit theatre, the region of Aurangabad emerged as a particularly vibrant center of activity. Much of this momentum was linked to the efforts of Dalit academicians and artists associated with *Milind Mahavidyalaya*, an institution founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to foster higher education and intellectual awakening among marginalized communities. Within this milieu, figures such as Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane, Avinash Dolas, Ashok Ahire, Khushal Kamble, Dhananjay Gudadhe, Baburao Gaikwad, and Madhusudan Kavati played a formative role in shaping Dalit drama. Their works consistently projected the lived realities of Dalits, dramatizing the everyday torments of caste oppression and the deep scars of untouchability, while simultaneously envisioning paths of resistance and dignity.

Beyond Aurangabad, Dalit theatre in Maharashtra expanded through the contributions of a new wave of writers who infused the stage with fresh perspectives and radical energy. Prominent among them were Datta Bhagat, Premanand Gajvi, Kamalakar Dahat, I. M. Narnavare, Suresh Meshram, Prabhakar Dupare, Dadakant Dhanvijay, Siddharth Gaidhane, Amar Ramteke, and Shrikrushna Raut. This collective constituted what may be described as an 'unstoppable force' in the evolution of Dalit theatre, as their works deepened the engagement with Ambedkarite philosophy, sharpened the critique of caste, and broadened the thematic and aesthetic horizons of modern Marathi drama.

Taken together, the contributions of both Aurangabad-based academicians and statewide playwrights illustrate the decentralized yet interconnected nature of the Dalit theatrical movement. While Aurangabad provided a crucial institutional base where academic inquiry and creative practice intersected, the wider network of writers across Maharashtra ensured that Dalit theatre acquired a diverse and dynamic character. This synergy enabled Dalit drama not only to contest hegemonic

cultural narratives but also to establish itself as a critical site of social pedagogy, cultural resistance, and collective identity formation.

Some of the prominent plays of this time are as follows:

Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane: *Mrutyu Shala (A Death Chamber, 1973) & Mukhavata (Face Mask, 1976)*

Suresh Meshram: *Ragging (1974), Vietnam (1975), Plaziya (1976)*

Kamalakar Dahat: *Narabali (Human sacrifice), Hatyakand (A Massacre), Trishulache Chavathe Tok (Forth tip of the Trident), Mrityudin va Muktidin (Doomsday or the day of Freedom, 1979)*

Prabhakar Dupare: *Satasamudra Palikade (Beyond the Seven Seas, 1978), Jaykranti (Revolution of Victory), Adrushya Natak (Invisible Play), Jumbar (Chandelier), Gangman*

I. M. Narnavare: *Vidrohache Pani Petale Aahe (Rebellion Water is Flared up, 1978)*

Prof. Datta Bhagat: *Chakraview (A Labyrinth, 1979), Thinagi (A spark, 1979), Wata Palwata (Routes and Escape Routes), Jahaj Futale Aahe (A Ship is Broken), Kheliya, Ashmak, etc.*

Daya Pawar: *Mumbai Nagari (A city of Mumbai, 1979)*

Pramanand Gajvi: *Ghotbhar Pani (A heap of water, 1979), Ekieke Shunya (One into One Zero), Kiravant, Devnavari (a narration based on tradition of Devadasi), Tanmajori (A Kind of slavery)., Wanjh Mati (an Unfertile Soil), Jay Jay Raghuveer Samarth (Hail to Raghuveer Samarth), Pandhara Budhawar (A White Wednesday), etc.*

Shrikrushna Raut: *Blind Show (1979)*

Tushar Bhadre: Karan (a kind of tradition to please the Landlord)

Hemant Khobragade: *Suryast (Sun Set, 1979)*

Ratnakar Matkari: *Lokkatha-78 (Folk tale-78, 1979)*

Texas Gaikwad: *Manvantar (A cosmic age), Aamhi Deshache Marekar (We responsible for the downfall of the country)*

Wasant Jadhav: *Potraj ('Potraj' a kind of superstitious tradition)*

Amar Ramteke: Shahar *(A City, A street play), Comrade Joshi*

Rustam Achalkhamb: *Kaifiyat (A narration of a pathetic story)*

Prakash Tribuvan: *Thamba Ramrajya Yetey ("Wait, Ramrajya is coming"), Ek Hota Raja (There was a King)*

Dharmesh Lokhande: *Republican Party of Indora*

Dadakant Dhanvijay: *Akinchan, Vikalp*

Raghunath Ambedkar: *Yudhya (The War)*

Vasant Londhe: *Suryaful Jage Andhari (Sunflower blooms in darkness)*

B.S. Shinde: *Vasavdatta, Kalokhachya Garbhat (In the womb of Darkness)*

Ramnath Chavhan: *Sakshipuram, Bamanwada (A Mansion of Brahmin)*

Baburav Khot: *Ganrambicha Bapu*

Adv. Rajendra Patil: *Ganatantra Vaishaliche (A Republic of Vaishali)*

Chandrakant Deokar: *Vadalatil Nauka (A ship caught up in hurricane)*

Laxman Mane: *Prakashputra (A Son of Light)*

Baburaoo Kamble: *Nyay (Justice)*

Bajirao Ramteke*: Ithe Manasala Nyay Nahi (No Justice to a Man here)*

L. J. Sonone: *Dari (A Gap)*

Balbhim Tarkaswe: *Swatantra Milaley Mhan (They said We Got Freedom!)*

A.K. Suradkar*: Sharan (Refuge)*

Dr. R. K. Chhirsagar: *Pratibimb (A Reflection)*

These are the plays prominently appear in 1970s and in later decades. These plays defines a new Dalit Theatre in its outlook and philosophy. These plays not only exposes the suffering of Dalit lives in the caste atmosphere, but also these plays effectively portrays the struggle of Dalits for liberty and equality. It also bring in the light moments in the Dalit life when they laugh and enjoy. But projection of Dalit hero come with its Protest and anger against injustice. "Dalit Theatre also reflects pictures of joys and sorrows of common Dalits. It also presents dramatically bleak pictures of injustice inflicted on them and their doers, the perpetrators of this injustice." (Nimbalkar, 2006: 152) on the basis of Dalit theatre evolved through the time and recievd support from the audiences and contributed with the transformation in social outlook. Dr. Ishwar Nandpure defines Dalit Theatre as: "A theatre that engages with the issues of Dalit life through the lens of Dalit consciousness, grounded in Ambedkarite thought, and dedicated to staging plays that promote awakening and social transformation, can be defined as Dalit Theatre." (Nandpure, 1997, 31)

The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre:

From the Dalit plays appear in the theatre we can evaluate its approach to the audience. Dalit plays interrogate the structural foundations of *"Dalitness"* within the Indian social hierarchy, seeking to uncover the mechanisms through which marginalization is perpetuated. They critique the entrenched social fabric of the nation, exposing the asymmetrical arrangement in which certain communities are systematically relegated to the margins, stigmatized, and demonized. Within

such a system, Dalits were historically excluded from participation in mainstream socio-cultural life, and consequently, from the political sphere itself. The theatre thus becomes a site of counter-narrative, where the silences imposed by caste are disrupted through collective memory and representation.

A recurring strategy in Dalit drama is the recounting of incidents of caste-based atrocities experienced by different Dalit communities across India. These dramatizations not only document historical and contemporary violence but also transform individual suffering into a collective experience of resistance. The plays highlight how caste identity is imposed at birth an indelible mark that predetermines social stigma and life chances. Among the recurring motifs, 'denial of access to water' emerges as a powerful symbol of exclusion and inequality, capturing the daily humiliations embedded in caste society.

Religion is another critical theme addressed within Dalit theatre. Many plays expose how religious institutions and practices have historically reinforced caste divisions, with priests and upper-caste custodians of temples often depicted as agents of domination. This dramatization mirrors lived realities, where access to sacred spaces has frequently been a flashpoint of caste conflict. However, post-Ambedkar Dalit theatre simultaneously foregrounds the rejection of superstition and blind faith, reflecting Ambedkar's rationalist ethos. Playwrights often assume a didactic role, warning communities against falling into the traps of irrational religious practices and instead encouraging critical inquiry and rational thought.

Cultural churning emerges as another important function of Dalit plays. By exposing the contradictions and exploitative mechanisms embedded within conventional religions, these plays inspire audiences to imagine alternative identities rooted

in the egalitarian philosophies of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar. The infusion of Ambedkarite thought allows Dalit theatre to act as a catalyst for building a progressive community, where cultural resistance becomes a prelude to social reconstruction.

Another key concern in Dalit theatre is the psychological impact of caste. Many plays underscore how caste engenders an internalized sense of inferiority, curtailing the Dalit individual's ability to envision life beyond the restrictions imposed by birth. Yet, in opposition to this imposed identity, Dalit plays project life as a horizon of possibilities—emphasizing education, employment, business, and economic empowerment as vehicles for liberation. Through such themes, theatre aligns itself with Ambedkar's insistence on education and self-advancement as pathways to emancipation.

In its outlook, Dalit plays assume a distinctly 'didactic function' by encouraging political awakening. They highlight the importance of active participation in democratic institutions, with the parliament positioned as the ultimate arena for securing justice and safeguarding rights. In this sense, Dalit theatre does not merely reflect lived experience but also directs communities towards political engagement, thereby fusing art with activism. As a matter of fact, Dalit plays function simultaneously as social critique, cultural pedagogy, and political intervention. Rooted in Ambedkarite philosophy, they dramatize oppression not as fate but as a condition to be contested and transformed, thereby shaping theatre into a vital instrument of social change.

When analyzing what distinguishes Dalit theatre from the mainstream, it is essential to examine its foundations, motifs, and approach. Unlike conventional theatre, which has historically marginalized or altogether excluded Dalit concerns, Dalit theatre places Dalit issues, experiences, and subjectivities at the very center of its aesthetic and political project. By doing

so, it redefines the purpose of performance: not as entertainment alone, but as an instrument of consciousness, resistance, and transformation. Mainstream theatre, particularly in its canonical forms, has rarely acknowledged Dalit presence, either as protagonists or as thematic concerns. Dalit playwrights, therefore, assumed the responsibility of filling this lacuna, crafting narratives that confront systemic marginalization and dramatize the lived experiences of communities historically denied dignity. This orientation situates Dalit theatre as a 'counter-public sphere'—a cultural domain where silenced voices are articulated and collective memory is mobilized for social change.

Dalit theatre derives much of its intellectual grounding from the emancipatory philosophies of 'Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar', which emphasize equality, justice, and rational inquiry. By drawing upon this triadic legacy, Dalit playwrights create a cultural space that enables Dalits to express their identities, struggles, and aspirations on their own terms. Importantly, Dalit theatre does not restrict itself to representing Dalits alone; it also projects the condition of all marginalized groups who suffer under the weight of the caste system, thereby broadening its scope to encompass a universal humanist ethos.

Aesthetic strategies also differentiate Dalit theatre. While embracing the formal structures of modern drama, it consciously integrates 'folk performance traditions' such as *'Tamasha'* and '*Shahiri'*. This blending of folk idioms with modern dramaturgy serves two functions: it anchors Dalit theatre in indigenous cultural expressions familiar to its audiences, and it ensures accessibility for rural and urban Dalit communities, many of whom remain economically disadvantaged and educationally marginalized. Such hybridization of form signals a democratization of theatre

itself, resisting elitist aesthetics and privileging cultural practices rooted in Dalit life-worlds.

At its philosophical core, Dalit theatre is didactic, consciously adopting the principles of 'pain, revolt, rejection, and acceptance'. Plays often dramatize suffering not as fatalistic destiny but as a condition that calls for rebellion against an unjust order. The Dalit hero, in this dramaturgy, embodies resistance: he revolts against caste oppression, rejects irrational traditions and religious practices that sustain slavery, and embraces the liberating principles of Buddhism. Central here are Buddhist teachings such as *'Anatta' (non-soul), 'Anitya' (impermanence),* and *'Nibbana' (liberation),* which offer both a metaphysical critique of *Brahmanical dogma* and an ethical framework for transcending caste.

Dalit theatre also performs a vital role of 'historical inquiry and identity formation'. It excavates the long history of caste-based discrimination while simultaneously retrieving alternative narratives of a prosperous and dignified Dalit past. This dual exploration of oppression and of resistance nurtures a sense of cultural selfhood that mainstream historiography has long denied. In this way, Dalit theatre contributes to the project of reclaiming history for the oppressed, transforming memory into a tool of empowerment. Ultimately, Dalit theatre is not simply an artistic practice but a cultural movement deeply bonded with the *'Dalit cause'*. It seeks to reach communities across rural and urban India, instilling a sense of self-respect, awakening political consciousness, and fostering solidarity. By centering human values derived from the teachings of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar, Dalit theatre situates the human being not caste, not tradition, not ritual as the nucleus of its vision. In doing so, it establishes itself as a theatre of emancipation, resistance, and reconstruction.

Conclusion

The journey of Dalit theatre, from its tentative beginnings in pre-Ambedkarite folk forms to its establishment as a conscious cultural movement rooted in Ambedkarite philosophy, reveals a trajectory of both artistic innovation and political assertion. Initially shaped through experiments with *'Tamasha'*, and *'Shahiri'*, Dalit theatre gradually shed its purely entertaining elements to become a medium of intellectual awakening and social critique. The landmark performance of *'Yugayatra'* (1955) marked a defining moment in this evolution, not only dramatizing the historical oppression of Dalits but also providing a template for future playwrights to weave together the legacies of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar into a coherent cultural narrative of resistance. In the decades that followed, figures such as Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane, Wamandada Kardak, Namdeo Whatkar, and others expanded the reach of Dalit drama by crafting plays that addressed lived realities of caste discrimination while simultaneously envisioning possibilities of emancipation. The involvement of Dalit academicians and artists in institutions like Milind Mahavidyalaya in Aurangabad further solidified the intellectual foundation of this theatre, while writers across Maharashtra including Datta Bhagat, Premanand Gajvi, and Khushal Kamble ensured that Dalit drama became a state-wide cultural phenomenon. Together, these playwrights constructed a new dramaturgy that replaced the absent Dalit hero of mainstream theatre with a figure of defiance and dignity, one who embodies the principles of pain, revolt, rejection, and acceptance.

Thematically, Dalit plays expose the violence of caste in its multiple forms social exclusion, denial of water, humiliation in religious spaces, and systemic atrocities while also highlighting the psychological wounds of stigma and inferiority. Yet, they move beyond documenting oppression by

offering visions of liberation grounded in Ambedkarite thought. By integrating the rationalist and egalitarian teachings of Buddhism with the reformist legacies of Phule and Ambedkar, Dalit theatre transforms itself into both pedagogy and activism, awakening its audiences to the possibilities of education, economic empowerment, and political participation.

In aesthetic terms, Dalit theatre challenges the elitist paradigms of mainstream drama by blending folk traditions with modern dramaturgy, thereby democratizing the stage and making it accessible to marginalized communities. Its didactic character often dismissed in conventional literary criticism becomes its greatest strength, for it redefines aesthetics in terms of truth, justice, and human dignity rather than ornamentation or emotional detachment. Thus, the significance of Dalit theatre lies not only in its artistic merit but also in its role as a cultural and political movement. It reconstructs history, interrogates religion, reshapes identity, and most importantly, provides a collective vision of a society beyond caste. By doing so, Dalit theatre affirms itself as a 'counter-canon within Indian aesthetics' a theatre of resistance, remembrance, and reconstruction. In keeping man at its center and liberation as its ultimate goal, it reclaims performance as a tool of awakening and positions itself as one of the most vital cultural movements in modern India.

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Six.
Unveiling Dalit Resistance: Philosophical and Theoretical Dimensions in Datta Bhagat's 'Routes and Escape Routes'

Introduction

Datta Bhagat's *'Routes and Escape Routes'* occupies a pivotal position in the trajectory of Dalit dramaturgy, reflecting both the historical oppression and the cultural resistance of marginalized communities. Emerging from a long tradition where Dalit voices were either silenced or distorted within mainstream Indian theatre, Bhagat's play asserts itself as a counter-narrative that privileges authenticity of experience. It stages the dialectic of oppression and liberation not as an abstract idea but as a lived reality, presented through characters, conflicts, and philosophical debates that resonate with the struggles of everyday Dalit life.

Central to the play is the influence of Ambedkarite thought, dramatized through binary opposites: Arjun and Satish, Kaka and Dasrao Guruji, Hema and Sonal who embody contrasting approaches to social change. These character pairings articulate the tension between unwavering commitment to Ambedkar's emancipatory vision and the compromises dictated by pragmatic survival. Bhagat thereby invites audiences and readers to interrogate the correctness of their own socio-political alignments, urging them toward a

more transformative engagement with Ambedkarite philosophy.

What distinguishes 'Routes and Escape Routes' from other social plays is its ability to blend philosophy with theatricality. It does not merely narrate oppression but converts the stage into a space of ideological confrontation and imaginative possibility. By integrating Ambedkarite philosophy with modern theoretical insights; such as Subaltern Studies, Poststructuralism, Existentialism, and Performance Theory, the play transcends conventional aesthetics, positioning Dalit theatre as both an artistic practice and a performative act of protest that redefines Indian dramaturgy.

Dalit Dramaturgy in the Larger Context of Indian Theatre:

Indian theatre has historically been shaped by Sanskrit classical traditions, folk performances, regional theatre forms, and modern experimental plays. Yet, for centuries, the voices and experiences of Dalits remained largely absent from these mainstream traditions. Even when caste appeared as a theme, it was often mediated through non-Dalit perspectives, reinforcing hierarchies rather than challenging them.

Dalit dramaturgy emerges as a radical corrective to this absence. Rooted in 'Ambedkarite philosophy' and the lived realities of marginalized communities, it redefines theatre as a site of protest, assertion, and cultural renewal. Unlike mainstream Indian theatre, which often prioritizes aesthetics or universality, Dalit theatre foregrounds 'caste oppression, social injustice, and the quest for dignity'. Its strength lies in fusing 'political urgency with dramatic creativity', turning the stage into a space where silenced histories and suppressed voices come alive.

Within Indian theatre, *Dalit dramaturgy* thus operates as both 'a counter-discourse and an innovation'. It disrupts

dominant narrative structures, introduces new idioms drawn from Dalit life and language, and demands a rethinking of what theatre should represent. In this sense, it contributes not only to the democratization of theatre but also to the 'redefinition of Indian aesthetics itself' placing resistance, liberation, and social justice at its core.

Place of Datta Bhagat in Dalit Literature:

Datta Bhagat (b. 1945) occupies a distinguished position in Marathi Dalit literature as a multifaceted playwright, short story writer, and critic. His academic training and deep knowledge of dramatic traditions enabled him to craft a distinct theatrical idiom for Dalit theatre; one that blends political urgency with aesthetic innovation. A staunch follower of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Bhagat's literary project is firmly anchored in the Ambedkarite goal of emancipating those historically relegated to the margins.

Emerging from the vibrant Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra, particularly around Aurangabad; Bhagat's intellectual environment was shaped by his teaching career at Marathwada University and his active participation in the radical cultural currents of the time. His creative output gained momentum during the heyday of the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s, which sought to dismantle caste hierarchies and redefine Indian aesthetics through protest, assertion, and social critique. In this context, Bhagat's plays articulate not only the 'anger and aspirations' of Dalit communities but also their 'philosophical and cultural visions'.

On stage, his dramaturgy transforms theatre into a 'political and cultural battlefield', dramatizing experiences of exploitation, displacement, and identity crises while simultaneously opening possibilities for liberation. A recurring tension in his works lies in the 'conflict between Ambedkarite idealism and pragmatic social realities', a theme that makes his

theatre both reflective and interventionist. Unlike mainstream drama, which has often marginalized Dalit voices, Bhagat's works embody 'literary resistance' and 'socio-political intervention', advancing the Buddha–Phule–Ambedkarite intellectual tradition through dramatic technique. His play *'Routes and Escape Routes'* marks a milestone in Dalit dramaturgy, consolidating his reputation as one of the most significant Dalit playwrights in India. More than a single literary achievement, the play demonstrates how Bhagat broadened the horizons of Indian theatre itself; recasting it as a medium of resistance, consciousness, and transformation.

Routes and Escape Routes: A Text of Resistance

Datta Bhagat's *'Routes and Escape Routes'* operates as a text of resistance on multiple levels, political, cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic. At its foundation, the play dramatizes the pervasive structural violence of caste while simultaneously envisioning the possibility of social transformation. Its 'thematic resistance' emerges through the exposure of entrenched caste hierarchies, experiences of displacement, and crises of identity. By foregrounding the lived realities of Dalit communities' realities that mainstream theatre has historically erased; Bhagat transforms themes of oppression, dignity, and emancipation into a manifesto of social protest.

Firmly anchored in 'Ambedkarite thought, the play not only critiques caste oppression but also interrogates the failure to fully realize Ambedkar's emancipatory vision. Characters are positioned as 'embodiments of binary worldview's idealism versus compromise, philosophy versus pragmatism. This dramatic tension does not remain abstract; it unfolds in the lived ethical choices of the characters, dramatizing the difficult decision between submission and resistance. Figures such as Arjun, Satish, Kaka, and Dasrao Guruji become symbolic representatives of ideological battles within Dalit politics,

compelling audiences to reflect on diverse strategies of survival and defiance whether confrontation, negotiation, or escape.

The very title of the play functions as a metaphorical framework: *"Routes"* symbolize the caste-determined pathways of confinement, while *"escape routes"* evoke rupture, liberation, and alternative possibilities. These metaphors challenge audiences to imagine resistance not merely as defiance but as the envisioning of entirely new social orders. Bhagat's dramaturgical craft further reinforces this vision; he departs from conventional dramatic forms by employing dialogic confrontations, silences, and symbolic staging that disrupt aesthetic expectations. The result is a theatre that moves beyond entertainment to become 'a performative act of protest'.

In doing so, the play enacts 'cultural resistance' by centering Dalit voices and asserting theatre as a space of memory, dignity, and self-representation. It resists both the historical invisibility of Dalit narratives and the compromises that dilute Ambedkarite ideals. Ultimately, *'Routes and Escape Routes'* is not simply a play but a 'political text in performance'; a work that embodies Dalit resistance by dramatizing the struggle between oppression and liberation through its characters, motifs, and structure, while simultaneously offering audiences a vision of justice, agency, and transformation.

Theoretical and Philosophical Framework

To comprehend the play, it is essential to situate it within the philosophical framework of *Ambedkarism*. The play's central characters embody and reflect this philosophy, yet their interactions also highlight the tensions that arise when Ambedkar's ideals are tested against practical realities. The conflict pivots around Kaka, Satish, and Arjun, whose ideological differences embody the challenges of translating Ambedkar's vision into lived social practice. Kaka's

endorsement of Arjun's activism clashes with Satish's reservations, as the latter critiques their methods as being inconsistent with Ambedkarite principles. However, Kaka and Arjun interpret Satish's critique as a failure to recognize the pragmatic necessities of social struggle. This tension illustrates a recurring dilemma in Ambedkarite praxis: the gap between idealist commitments and the compromises necessitated by activism.

The play consciously invokes Dr. Ambedkar's powerful mantra, "Educate, Agitate, and Organise," a call that remains central to Dalit emancipation. For communities long suppressed under caste hierarchies, Ambedkar envisioned higher education not merely as a means of personal mobility but as a collective tool for empowerment. He argued that education was indispensable for dismantling caste oppression, fostering economic independence, and cultivating critical thinking, moral character, and self-reliance. As he insisted, education was to "reclaim human personality" and lay the foundation for a social democracy rooted in equality and fraternity.

Ambedkar consistently underscored this in both his public speeches and legislative interventions. At the Mahad Satyagraha, he asserted: "I have no doubt that the spread of education will, in course of time, materially alter these conditions and bring the two communities in a clear and friendly contact with each other and that Untouchability will be a thing of the past." (Narake, Part I, 2019: 19). This statement not only signals Ambedkar's faith in education as a tool of social transformation but also reflects his conviction that caste boundaries could be eroded through shared intellectual and civic engagement.

Yet, his vision extended beyond primary or even secondary schooling. Ambedkar stressed the necessity of advanced education that could prepare Dalits to occupy leadership and

administrative roles. In the manifesto of *the Scheduled Caste Federation,* he explicitly stated: "The sort of Education which the Scheduled Castes Federation has in mind with regard to these classes is not primary education, not even Secondary Education. What it has in mind is advanced education of such high order, both in this country and outside, which will enable these classes to fit themselves for taking hold of administration." (Narake, Part I, 2019: 389). This emphasis on higher education reveals Ambedkar's strategic foresight: empowerment was not complete until Dalits could shape governance and policy-making itself.

Equally crucial in Ambedkar's philosophy was the principle of organisation. He consistently appealed to Dalits to unite as a collective force to press for their rights. In an appeal to Indian princes to fund a social centre for untouchables in Bombay, Ambedkar wrote:

> "The Princes and People of India will not, I am sure, fail to realise what tremendous and irresistible force the elevation of the Untouchables will supply to the national regeneration and reconstruction of India. The Social Centre will of course so organise the Untouchables that they will be able to rise socially and culturally above their present level, attain the status of human beings and live on terms of social equality with the rest of the Indian Community." (Narake, Part II, 2019: 453).

This appeal underscores Ambedkar's vision of social uplift as not merely a Dalit project but integral to India's democratic regeneration. The insistence on "social and cultural rise" makes clear that political emancipation was inseparable from reclaiming dignity and erasing the stigma of caste.

The third pillar of Ambedkar's triad 'agitation' was equally indispensable. He called upon Dalits to harness agitation as a collective tool for asserting their demands. The constitution of the Scheduled Caste Federation captures this objective with clarity: "To organize the scheduled caste of India, to educate them and to agitate for their social, economic and political freedom and to make them strive for their wellbeing and advancement." (Narake, Part II, 2019: 457). The slogan "Educate, Agitate, and Organise" thus emerged as a lasting mantra for Ambedkar's followers, offering not only a roadmap for emancipation but also a strategy for collective identity formation.

The play *'Routes and Escape Routes'* mirrors these philosophical currents, while also dramatizing the difficulties of their application. The characters' ideological disagreements can be read as symbolic of the broader misinterpretations of Ambedkar's thought. Arjun, with his aggressive emphasis on mass agitation, misses Ambedkar's deeper vision of building social harmony alongside resistance, which leads to clashes with other communities. Kaka, despite having witnessed Ambedkar's era, ironically misreads this vision as well, prioritizing agitation over equilibrium. Satish, often dismissed as an "armchair philosopher," demonstrates foresight in recognizing the risks of confrontational activism that disregards Ambedkar's reconciliatory aspirations. The subplot concerning the struggle for flats for flood victims further deepens the play's resonance. Here, the characters' fight for justice and dignity echoes Ambedkar's constitutional ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity principles enshrined in independent India's democratic framework. By staging the gap between aspirations and realizations, the play reflects the ongoing struggle of Dalit activists who mobilize to claim rights already guaranteed but often denied in practice. The play essentially foregrounds Ambedkar's vision of social justice, yet also reveals the persistent tensions in interpreting and

implementing it. The friction between characters such as Kaka, Satish, and Arjun demonstrates how Ambedkarism, though rooted in ideals of harmony and equality, is often misread or selectively applied. This misinterpretation generates not only intra-community conflict but also friction with broader society, suggesting that the legacy of Ambedkar continues to demand careful negotiation between principle and practice.

While examining 'Routes and Escape Routes' through the lens of caste hegemony, it becomes clear that the play stages a constant negotiation between power and resistance. The binary opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed is not just a social reality but also an ideological one, deeply embedded within structures of caste domination. Subaltern theory, in this regard, provides a critical framework to unpack these dynamics. The play repeatedly recalls the violent clashes between communities, which often culminate in bloodshed, yet it also demonstrates how discriminatory forces remain firmly intact. This persistence of inequality forces us to ask: what enables such power structures to endure even in the face of resistance? The answer, as the theory suggests, lies in the ideological apparatuses that guard the caste system and ensure its continuity.

The concept of the *"subaltern,"* originally drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings and later expanded by Ranjit Guha and his collective of Subaltern Studies scholars, is crucial here. Their project aimed to rethink Indian history by shifting focus to those marginalized voices excluded from mainstream narratives. As Guha explains in 'Subaltern Studies I', the term "subaltern" refers to "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1982: vii). This definition is significant because it broadens the scope of oppression beyond economics, recognizing that subordination is multidimensional.

Guha's engagement with Gramsci is particularly important for understanding the mechanics of domination. While Gramsci analyzed capitalism through the notion of cultural hegemony, Guha reinterpreted this framework in the colonial and postcolonial Indian context. His observation that "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" (Guha, 1999: xvi) underscores the paradox of resistance: even when the oppressed gain consciousness and mobilize, they remain entangled within the structures of domination. This insight resonates strongly with 'Routes and Escape Routes', where Dalits, though awakened to their oppression and aware of their adversaries, continue to face systemic discrimination and control by casteist forces. But the play's foundation is strongly based on Ambedkarism.

Datta Bhagat's play thus functions as more than a dramatization of caste conflict; it is also a counter-narrative that interrogates the political and social frameworks sustaining oppression. By centering Dalit voices, Bhagat challenges the legitimacy of dominant narratives and questions the very foundations of power. As "Subaltern Studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the people to speak within the pages of elitist historiography, and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of the truly oppressed." (Mambrol. 2016) In this light, Bhagat's work does precisely that: it recovers the silenced voices of the marginalized and projects them as active agents of resistance. Furthermore, when read alongside Ambedkarite thought, the play's critique deepens. Ambedkar's emphasis on annihilating caste adds a practical political dimension to the subaltern framework, offering both theoretical and emancipatory strategies for understanding resistance. Thus, the interplay of subaltern theory and Ambedkarism allows us to analyze not only the representation of caste oppression in the play but also the broader question

of how literature itself can intervene in oppressive structures by amplifying subaltern voices.

Poststructuralism provides a compelling lens through which to interpret '*Routes and Escape Routes'*, particularly because the very title of the play gestures toward multiplicity and instability of meaning. The juxtaposition of "route" and "escape route" immediately invites a deconstructionist inquiry: neither term stands as a fixed or self-evident truth, but rather, they point toward competing pathways, strategies, and identities. In this sense, the play resonates with Jacques Derrida's central insight that meaning is never stable, but constantly deferred and reconstituted. "Contemporary thinkers like Foucault, Barthes and Lacan undertook in diverse ways to decentre/ undermine the traditional claims for the existence of a self-evident foundation that guarantees the validity of knowledge and truth."(Mambrol, 2016) This decentering becomes particularly significant when analyzing how Bhagat's characters resist, negotiate, or reproduce the dominant structures of caste.

The series of debates staged between Satish and Arjun, Satish and Dasrao Guruji, and between Sonal and Kaka, are not simply arguments about social reform but discursive struggles over the meaning of caste itself. These exchanges destabilize the "truth" of caste as a naturalized social category and instead foreground its ideological construction. "The theory laid greater stress on the operations of ideology and power on human subjectivity. In deconstructionist thought, the connection between thought/reality, subject/object, self/other are viewed as primarily linguistic terms, and not as pre-existent to language."(Mambrol, 2016) Thus, within the play, caste identity is not an immutable reality but a contested discourse, constructed and reconstructed through language, power, and ideology. This tension is sharply embodied in the contrasting figures of Kaka and Satish. Kaka is willing to transgress legality, even embracing violence, as a means of

pursuing social change, while Satish insists on the Ambedkarite path of lawful, democratic reform. Their divergence reflects the poststructuralist rejection of singular, objective solutions; there is no definitive *"route"* or *"escape route,"* only competing discourses that reveal the fluidity of resistance. Here, Bhagat dramatizes what poststructuralist thought emphasizes: that subjectivity itself is unstable, shifting according to the discursive and material contexts in which it is situated.

Further, poststructuralism's critique of structuralism is particularly relevant to the play's treatment of Dalit identity. As the Poetry Foundation notes, *"Poststructuralism*, like deconstruction, emphasized the instability of meaning. While structuralism regarded language as a closed system, poststructuralism identified an inevitable gap between signifier and signified."(Poetry Foundation, 2024) This gap becomes evident in the play's portrayal of Dalit and anti-caste discourses, which, rather than forming a unified collective movement, often fracture into self-interest and opportunism. Arjun's decision to yield space to Dasrao Guruji during the handover ceremony for flood victims illustrates this very dilution of collective struggle. The gesture, cloaked in pragmatism, reveals how anti-caste rhetoric can be co-opted and redirected to serve dominant power structures, rather than dismantling them. In this sense, 'Routes and Escape Routes' performs what deconstruction calls "double reading" it exposes the internal contradictions within emancipatory discourses. The play does not resolve the tension between resistance and complicity; instead, it demonstrates how attempts to subvert casteist structures are continuously destabilized by the same forces they seek to overcome. The instability of meaning whether of "*Dalit identity," "social change,"* or *even "escape"* becomes the central motif of the play, aligning closely with poststructuralist insights into the impossibility of fixed truths.

Existentialist struggles are central to the play, where Dalit characters continually resist an unjust social order in their pursuit of survival with dignity. Modern existentialist theory provides a critical lens through which these struggles can be examined, as it emphasizes the human condition, the search for meaning, and the weight of individual choice under oppressive circumstances. *Existentialism* is primarily concerned with "the condition of human existence, and an individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life."(Mambrol, 2016) Applying this framework to 'Routes and Escape Routes' allows us to see how the play situates Dalit experiences within the broader socio-political and cultural reality of caste oppression in India. The characters' struggles are not merely social or political in nature but also existential, revealing the deeply human need to assert agency and dignity in the face of systemic subjugation.

The play vividly captures how caste operates as a structuring force that shapes not only external lives but also inner emotional worlds. Existentialist philosophy, with its focus on subjectivity on freedom, guilt, despair, and responsibility becomes especially relevant here. As Mambrol (2016) notes, existentialists turn their attention less to abstract systems of knowledge and more to lived experience, emotions, and belief. In this sense, the play interrogates not only the legitimacy of religious and social hierarchies but also the psychic toll exacted on those forced to inhabit positions of subordination. Through its characters, it stages an intense dialogue on faith, power, and human suffering under caste hegemony.

Each Dalit character embodies a different existential trajectory. Shewanta's death dramatizes the ultimate cost of resistance; Sonal's forced compliance with patriarchal expectations reflects the compromises imposed by familial and social pressures; Satish's uncertainty reveals the disorientation

of questioning deeply ingrained social connections; and Kaka's agonizing end illustrates the despair of a life consumed by systemic frustration. These narratives resonate with existentialist thought, particularly in their portrayal of human beings grappling with the absurdity of existence, torn between the desire for dignity and the constraints of social reality.

The symbolic distinction between *"routes"* and *"escape routes"* sharpens the play's existential depth. 'Routes' embody an authentic engagement with life embracing creativity, responsibility, and meaning-making despite adversity. In contrast, *'escape routes'* represent avoidance, despair, or conformity to prescribed roles that deny true freedom and agency. Thus, the play positions the Dalit struggle not only as a political and social fight but also as an existential confrontation with the fundamental conditions of being human.

Another theoretical framework that proves highly relevant to the play is 'Performative Theory', which deepens our understanding of how characters' actions and speech actively shape their social realities and identities. At its core, performative theory is concerned with the idea that language and action do not merely reflect or describe reality but are constitutive of it they bring social meanings and structures into being. The origins of this theoretical approach can be traced to J. L. Austin's groundbreaking work on "performative utterances." As Julie Rak explains, "J. L. Austin proposed performatives as utterances that were not constative, in that they were not verifiable, famously arguing that performatives are illocutionary, because they 'do' an action as they are said or written." (Rak, 2021) This conceptual shift radically transformed the way scholars understand the power of language: words are not passive descriptors but instruments of action that carry material and social consequences.

The theory was later expanded and problematized by Judith Butler, particularly in the domain of gender identity. As Julie Rak notes, "Performativity in Butler's view explains how gender identity constructs subjects and then is connected (often falsely or painfully) to ideas about sex assignment, bodies and sexuality, although the constant repetition of gender norms can result in new and unexpected ways of being gendered." (Rak, 2021) Butler's intervention highlights how identities are not fixed essences but are continuously produced and reproduced through iterative performances. This has far-reaching implications beyond gender, opening avenues to examine how caste, class, religion, and other social categories are similarly enacted and contested.

Applied to *'Routes and Escape Routes'*, performative theory allows us to read the play as a site where Dalit identity is not only represented but actively constituted through speech, action, and resistance. The characters' utterances, choices, and embodied struggles become performative acts that both reflect and reshape the oppressive socio-political order of caste. Their resistance is not abstract but enacted in lived moments dialogues, confrontations, silences, and even deaths that challenge hegemonic norms. In this sense, the play dramatizes how identity is performatively constructed in the crucible of oppression, trauma, and resilience.

The dialectic of *"routes" and "escape routes"* can also be illuminated through performative theory. '*Routes'* symbolize conscious and authentic performances of liberation actions that openly claim dignity, agency, and transformative power. By contrast, 'escape routes' signify performances of avoidance, subversion, or desperate resistance, which may involve covert, radical, or even illegal methods of survival. Both, however, are performative strategies that Dalit characters employ to negotiate their existence within an exclusionary caste system.

Moreover, the collective trauma experienced by Dalits in the play can itself be understood as a performative act. Trauma here is not confined to a singular historical moment but is repeatedly enacted, remembered, and embodied through stories, rituals, and shared struggles. In this sense, trauma becomes a constitutive force in shaping collective identity and memory, ensuring that suffering is not erased but instead functions as an enduring performance of resistance. The play, therefore, highlights how subjugated communities transform their wounds into acts of meaning-making and identity formation.

Ultimately, performative theory underscores the dynamic, constructed nature of the identities in 'Routes and Escape Routes'. The Dalit struggle is not portrayed as a static condition but as an ongoing performance of agency and resistance. Every action whether through overt defiance, subtle negotiation, or tragic surrender participates in a performative process that both reveals and destabilizes the cultural and political logics of caste. In this way, the play dramatizes how oppressed communities actively "do" their existence in ways that challenge the very foundations of social hierarchy.

Routes and Escape Routes: Plot Overview

Datta Bhagat's play *'Routes and Escape Routes' (1987),* directed by Sudhir Mungi and staged at Tilak Smarak Mandir, marks a milestone in modern Indian theatre for its bold confrontation with caste oppression. On the surface, it deals with the friction between Dalits and upper castes, but its deeper canvas portrays the fragility of social harmony under the weight of casteist prejudice. At its heart lies the refusal of dominant upper-caste groups to acknowledge Dalits with dignity, equality, or basic human recognition. Alongside this prejudice, the play also exposes the manipulative greed of contractors, leaders, and community figures who exploit Dalit struggles for personal gain.

The play unfolds against the backdrop of the post-1956 Buddhist conversion movement, which had awakened a new consciousness among Dalits. This awareness was not merely religious but also political, social, and cultural, rooted in the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalits were becoming assertive, claiming their rightful space in the nation. *'Routes and Escape Routes'* captures this transition by juxtaposing two approaches legal, constitutional, Ambedkarite struggles versus impulsive, militant, and sometimes corrupted pathways that lead to tragedy.

a. An Inter-caste Marriage as a Beacon of Change

The story begins with Professor Satish, a Dalit intellectual, who marries Hema, the daughter of a progressive Brahmin judge. Their marriage is not just a personal union but a symbol of Ambedkar's vision of a casteless India. Educated Dalit leaders like Satish believed that inter-caste marriages could break down centuries-old barriers and foster genuine social integration.

Yet, such a progressive step does not come without tension. Hema's mother initially resists the marriage, but her reservations dissolve quickly. Ironically, the stronger opposition comes from Satish's own uncle and mentor, Kaka. From his perspective, Satish's marriage deprives Dalit women of deserving partners, revealing a contradiction: even among Dalits, patriarchal and conservative views often overpowered Ambedkarite ideals. By refusing to support inter-caste unions, Kaka directly undermines Ambedkar's blueprint for a new social order.

Despite this, Hema emerges as a vital force in the household. She is empathetic, thoughtful, and deeply engaged in community issues, often offering insights to Satish, Kaka, and Arjun (a fiery Dalit youth). She proves herself not only as

a wife and daughter-in-law but also as a mediator, attempting to bridge divides between Dalits and upper castes, between men and women, and between ideological extremes. Still, her attempts to unite Sonal daughter of Dasroa Guruji an upper-caste with Arjun fail, exposing the stubborn barriers of caste and patriarchy.

b. Three Central Conflicts Driving the Play

The play weaves together 'three major conflicts' that run parallel on stage, interlocking the personal with the political:

i. The Struggle of Flood Victims

A government housing scheme for flood victims becomes the flashpoint. The scheme, though ostensibly for the needy, is hijacked by an upper-caste contractor determined to allocate houses to his own relatives. Dasrao Guruji, a freedom fighter from the upper castes, also seeks to exploit the scheme for personal gain. Kaka and Arjun step in, forcibly securing flats for Dalit victims. This directly opposes Satish, who advocates for a constitutional and legal route plans in securing loans, creating housing societies, and ensuring long-term stability.

Arjun, however, is driven by impatience and anger. His decision to seize houses for Dalit flood victims without legal sanction, supported by Kaka, provokes non-Dalit flood victims. When both communities plan protest marches on the same day, Satish warns against escalation. Ignoring him, Arjun and Kaka push forward, leading to bloody clashes in which Shewanta, a widowed Dalit woman, loses her life. This episode starkly highlights the dangers of militancy and contrasts it with Ambedkar's call for legal, rational struggle.

ii. The Ideological Divide within the Dalit Community

At the heart of the play lies the ideological conflict between Satish's Ambedkarite vision and the militant impatience of

Kaka and Arjun. For Satish, the struggle for dignity must remain anchored in legality, constitutional morality, and long-term social harmony. He believes that rights won through law sustain the self-respect of the oppressed and protect them from future backlash. In contrast, Kaka and Arjun embrace forceful action, guided more by immediate anger than reflective foresight. Their approach culminates in riots that expose the destructive potential of unrestrained militancy, positioning Satish as the moral compass of the narrative.

This divergence becomes sharply visible in the debate between Satish and Arjun. When Dasrao Guruji alerts Satish to Arjun's plan of forcibly occupying houses meant for flood victims, Satish dismisses it at first, unable to believe such unlawful behavior could emerge from within his community. For him, the very image of Ambedkarites is at stake acts of lawlessness risk putting the entire community on trial. When Arjun later admits to breaking locks and occupying homes, Satish is stunned into silence but quickly appeals to Arjun's conscience: "Are you sure you have done nothing wrong, Arjun?" Arjun replies with certainty: "Absolutely sir." Satish, however, does not waver in his principles. He condemns the act as "Goondaism", stressing that even well-intentioned lawlessness undermines both morality and justice. Satish's anger is intensified when he learns that non-flood-affected Dalits also seized houses illegally. Meanwhile, he himself had been working tirelessly through legal means, establishing a housing society, securing registration, and arranging a loan to rehabilitate flood victims: "Arjun, think with a cool head. How many people are you pushing into a sea of troubles along with yourself? Our housing society has been registered now. We'll get a loan next month." (Mee, 2017: 302). Yet Arjun resists, demanding immediate solutions: "Why take that? Ask them to give those houses to us instead." (Mee, 2017: 302). This exposes Arjun's distrust of Satish's so-called "passive" approach. His claim to a "natural right" over the houses

ignores the larger constitutional principle of equality that Satish upholds.

Arjun's rhetoric further reveals his exclusivist mindset. He declares bitterly: "And these are the people who brand me a casteist! People in Bhim Nagar have been living in hutments that leak. The rains are just round the corner. I made arrangements for them… I'll think only of my caste. That's all." (Mee, 2017: 302). This caste-centered reasoning, while born out of frustration, turns inward and selfish, overlooking the fact that true Ambedkarism demands justice for all marginalized groups. Satish, in contrast, insists that constitutional provisions guarantee equal rights to every victim, and Ambedkarite leadership must never degenerate into snatching away rights from others. His inclusive approach reflects Ambedkar's warning against parochialism, insisting instead on universal justice and social harmony. The ideological rift deepens when Satish recalls the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927. He reminds Kaka and Arjun that when thousands of Dalits, led by Dr. Ambedkar, faced stone pelting, they restrained themselves from retaliation despite possessing the power to destroy the village. Ambedkar's leadership turned suffering into strength, refusing to reduce the struggle to mere vengeance:

> "But it never happened. Babasaheb didn't utter even a single curse in relation why? The activists quietly faced the showers of stones and pelts to protect their leader. But no one lifted even a finger in retaliation… Kaka, it was a historical moment. A moment when Dalits realized their collective power… Remember, Babasaheb warns, 'It doesn't matter if you can't advance, this chariot, never-never reverse it.'" (Mee, 2017: 314–15).

Through this retelling, Satish articulates the core of Ambedkarism: movements must be rooted in discipline,

patience, and foresight rather than impulsive violence. His appeal is not cowardice, as Kaka accuses, but a principled defense of Ambedkar's vision of rational activism. Unfortunately, Kaka and Arjun reject his counsel, pressing forward with their Morcha. The result is catastrophic: violent clashes between communities, loss of lives such as Shewanta's, and the ultimate collapse of their militant strategy.

The outcome vindicates Satish's warnings. Where Kaka and Arjun mistook militancy for courage, Satish embodied Ambedkar's insistence that true progress is measured not by temporary victories but by sustainable, just, and dignified gains. Bhagat's narrative leaves the audience with a powerful contrast: between activism that burns bright but self-destructs, and Ambedkarite struggle that resists provocation, builds institutions, and advances justice without reversing the chariot of history.

iii. Personal and Patriarchal Struggles: Tormented Women

Datta Bhagat's *'Routes and Escape Routes'* not only foregrounds caste conflict but also reveals the subtler and often overlooked dimension of 'patriarchal subjugation of women'. Through the characters of Hema, Sonal, and Shewanta, the play stages the ways in which womenwhether Brahmin or Dalit become subjects of both caste and gender oppression. The narrative thus works as a layered text where the intersections of caste, patriarchy, and subaltern female voices are made visible, albeit with different degrees of articulation.

Hema, daughter of a forward-minded justice, grows up in a liberal Brahmin household and marries Professor Satish, a Dalit intellectual she meets during the Vikranda social movement. On the surface, her marriage seems to embody Ambedkar's call for inter-caste unions as a step towards

dismantling caste hierarchies. Yet, her lived reality in the household reveals a different truth: Hema is continually targeted because of her Brahmin background.

Kaka, Satish's uncle, is particularly harsh in this regard. His sarcasm and constant caste-based jibes undermine her dignity. His remark: "After all, we are merely Buddhists! But you are a Brahmin! On the top of everything else you are an educated" (Mee, 2017: 286) exposes the persistence of caste complexes even within supposedly radical Ambedkarite spaces. Hema resists, demanding: "Stop referring to my caste, Kaka, in every other sentence" (Mee, 2017: 287). Her protest is not just personal but political, pointing out the hypocrisy of a man who claimed loyalty to Ambedkar but failed to support the very act Ambedkar championed inter-caste marriage.

Through these exchanges, the play demonstrates that 'male dominion operates even in emancipatory movements'. Hema, despite being a Brahmin, becomes a soft target of Dalit male insecurity and suspicion. She is othered simultaneously for breaking her caste ties and for being a woman who dared to choose her partner. Her resilience, however, is remarkable: she maintains her dignity, fosters bonds within the household, and emerges as a moral compass, exposing the contradictions of "progressive" men like Kaka.

Sonal a daughter of Brahmin dasroa Guruji represents another dimension of subaltern womanhood. In love with Arjun, she turns to Hema for support. Yet her attempt to test her father's attitude by placing a letter on his desk backfires. Mistaken as a love proposal from Arjun, it leads to Arjun's public humiliation at the hands of Dasrao Guruji. The episode reveals how 'women's attempts to assert agency are often misread, misused, or silenced' by patriarchal structures. Eventually, Sonal bows to pressure and agrees to an arranged marriage with Arvind Deshmukh, an upper-caste man implicated in anti-Dalit violence. Her trajectory highlights how

women across castes are treated as pawns in patriarchal arrangements, their desires and aspirations subordinated to family honor and social expectations. By marrying Sonal off to a violent oppressor, the play underscores the irony of a society that celebrates "progressive" ideals while reducing women to tools for maintaining caste and patriarchal order.

If Hema and Sonal occupy visible spaces within the household narrative, Shewanta embodies the 'silenced, subaltern Dalit woman' whose struggles are equally crucial but far less recognized. A rickshaw-puller's widow, Shewanta dreams of pursuing her D. Ed degree to secure employment. Though Kaka arranges a certificate for her with Dasrao Guruji's help, the act already signals a contradiction Dalit women's empowerment remains dependent on negotiations with upper-caste men. As a flood victim, Shewanta joins the rebellion to seize houses meant for displaced people. Yet soon after, she becomes the victim of internal patriarchal violence. When she questions Arjun's misappropriation of community funds, he retaliates by forcibly evicting her from her house, throwing her belongings into the street. Her vocal demand for accountability, a rare act of courage for a marginalized widow, is punished with exclusion. Kaka remains blind to her suffering, further emphasizing how Dalit male leaders often fail their own women. Upon learning the truth kaka felt bad for her and became frustrated for his support to Arjun who doesn't deserve it. Her death in the communal riots is a chilling reminder of how 'Dalit women are the first casualties in battles both external (with upper castes) and internal (within the community)'. Although Arjun is cleared of direct responsibility for her death, the injustice she endured cannot be erased. Shewanta's silencing exposes how Dalit women, even when assertive, are marginalized within both caste and gender hierarchies.

Together, the stories of Hema, Sonal, and Shewanta form a mosaic of women's oppression within caste society. Hema, despite her resilience, suffers continuous reminders of her "outsider" status. Sonal loses her autonomy to patriarchal dictates. Shewanta, the most subaltern figure, is punished for her voice and dies unheard. The irony, as Bhagat highlights, is that even in *"forward-minded"* or *"reformist"* spaces Ambedkarite movements, inter-caste marriages, nationalist rhetoric women are denied full equality.

From an 'Ambedkarite feminist lens', the play makes two things clear:

1. 'Inter-caste marriage and legal reforms are not sufficient if patriarchy remains intact.' The liberation of women, particularly Dalit women, requires dismantling both caste and gender domination.
2. 'Dalit women's experiences expose the double burden of caste and gender.' Unlike upper-caste women like Hema and Sonal, whose struggles remain within the family sphere, Dalit women like Shewanta face both external oppression and internal betrayal.

In '*Routes and Escape Routes'*, Bhagat unmasks not only caste oppression but also the gendered subjugation embedded within it. The three women characters, though situated differently one Brahmin wife, one Brahmin daughter, and one Dalit widow share a common fate of being subordinated by patriarchal norms. Hema's protests, Sonal's silenced desires, and Shewanta's tragic end together reveal that the dream of a casteless society is incomplete without addressing gender justice.

c. The Rise and Fall of Arjun and Kaka

Arjun emerges as the figure of the *"angry young Dalit,"* embodying the impatience and urgency of a community denied justice for centuries. His anger, however, does not translate

into ethical leadership. Instead, his reckless choices and corruption mirror the very structures of exploitation he claims to resist. The misappropriation of relief funds and his violent silencing of Shewanta who dares to hold him accountable unmask how power, when internalized uncritically, can reproduce Brahminical patterns of domination even within Dalit politics. Shewanta's death during the riots becomes more than a personal tragedy; it exposes how Dalit women are doubly exploited first by the state and caste society, and then by their own leaders who instrumentalize them for political gain.

Kaka's trajectory underscores a generational rupture within Ambedkarite politics. Once a respected guide, his trust in Arjun reflects a deep yearning for continuity in the struggle. Yet his blindness to Arjun's betrayal reveals how ideological purity without vigilance can turn into complicity. Having already witnessed the fragmentation of the RPI and the corrosion of solidarity among Dalit leaders, Kaka now confronts betrayal from within his own circle. His late realization that Arjun is unworthy of the movement pushes him into despair, symbolizing the collapse of an older leadership that could not reconcile radical vision with the pragmatics of political survival. Through Kaka's downfall, the text destabilizes the very image of the "ideal leader," suggesting that Dalit politics itself is haunted by fractures, self-betrayals, and the danger of replicating the very hierarchies it seeks to destroy.

d. Satish: The Steadfast Ambedkarite

Satish stands as the embodiment of Ambedkar's call for justice through constitutional and democratic means. His faith in legality and rational debate contrasts sharply with Arjun's fiery militancy, producing a tension that reflects larger dilemmas within Dalit politics. While critics dismiss him as an "armchair philosopher," his commitment to procedure and

social harmony highlights the often-overlooked necessity of systemic change rather than impulsive revolt. Yet, from a deconstructive standpoint, Satish's reliance on legality exposes its own fragility constitutionalism itself is shaped within structures that have historically denied justice to Dalits. Thus, his role simultaneously affirms Ambedkarite rationalism and reveals its limits when confronted with lived oppression.

The moment of self-doubt after Kaka's death reveals Satish's personality as shaped by conscientiousness and restraint, traits that, while stabilizing, risk paralysis in times of crisis. Supported by Hema whose nurturing role can be read as both sustaining and symbolically feminized within a male-dominated political narrative Satish regains his footing. His decision to defend Arjun after his arrest complicates the binary between lawful reform and radical passion. By recognizing Arjun's raw energy as potentially transformative, Satish demonstrates a leader's adaptive capacity: balancing firmness with openness, principle with pragmatism.

From a deconstructive lens, this moment destabilizes the neat opposition between the "ideal reformist" and the "corrupt radical." Instead, it suggests that *Ambedkarite politics* must wrestle with contradictions discipline versus anger, legality versus resistance, patience versus urgency. The news of Hema's pregnancy in the conclusion symbolically extends this tension into the future. The unborn child becomes more than a metaphor for hope; it represents the possibility of synthesizing seemingly irreconcilable approaches. Through this gesture, the play suggests that the Ambedkarite struggle is not about choosing one path over another, but about continuously negotiating between competing impulses within the community's leadership and identity.

e. The Lasting Relevance of the Play

'Routes and Escape Routes' is not just theatre it is a mirror to India's caste-ridden reality. Its title encapsulates the duality of Dalit struggle: every *"route"* toward liberation is accompanied by tempting *"escape routes"* that lead to corruption, violence, or compromise. The brilliance of the play lies in its ability to connect personal struggles marriage, widowhood, and generational clashes with larger socio-political battles. It dramatizes how caste is not merely a structural issue but something that seeps into love, family, leadership, and daily choices.

The play asks questions that remain urgent even today:

1. Should change be pursued through constitutional patience or militant action?
2. How can oppressed communities guard themselves against betrayal from within?
3. Can inter-caste marriages truly dissolve caste boundaries, or do hidden prejudices linger?
4. And above all, can women and marginalized voices carve out their agency in a society that restricts them?

By refusing easy answers, *'Routes and Escape Routes'* compels audiences to reflect. And this is the new dramaturgy and beauty of Dalit theatre like intimate theatre involves audience in creating the meanings to their issues. It also warns of the dangers of impulsive militancy while affirming the power of Ambedkar's vision of reason, dignity, and legality. The ending hopeful yet cautious remains a reminder that the struggle for equality is ongoing, and that every generation must decide which route it will take, and which escape routes it must resist.

Characters as Agents of Resistance

The play *'Routes and Escape Routes'* foregrounds prominent Dalit characters who follow the teachings of Dr. B. R.

Ambedkar and, by extension, embrace Buddhism as part of their ideological and spiritual identity. A close reading of the play reveals that these characters embody two distinct directions in thought and action, reflecting the larger tensions within the Dalit movement itself. Their debates and arguments within the community are not merely rhetorical exercises but attempts to prove whose interpretation of Ambedkarism is the "true" path to social justice.

This central tension is most clearly dramatized in the debates between Professor Satish on one side, and the duo of Kaka and Arjun on the other. Their disagreements mirror a broader ideological conflict within Dalit activism, particularly during the era of the Dalit Panthers a group with which playwright Bhagat himself was closely associated. During this period, the Dalit movement was divided over whether Marxism should be integrated into its strategies. While many rejected the idea, others passionately supported Marxist influence, including violent methods of resistance, as necessary tools to achieve social transformation. This rift inevitably gave rise to factionalism among Dalit thinkers and writers. Sharankumar Limbale, in 'Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature', captures the impact of this intellectual split: "the separate Buddhist, Dalit and *Asmitadarsh* literary conferences are clear example of group formation among Dalit writers" (Limbale, 2018: 65). His observation underscores a key characteristic of Dalit intellectual culture the tendency toward debate, argumentation, and even schism. What begins as an ideological clash often spills into personal rivalries and hardens into long-term divisions, weakening collective strength. This dynamic is not limited to literary circles; it is equally evident in the Ambedkarite political sphere, where national leaders repeatedly fragmented into competing groups. Ironically, despite these divisions, Dalit activists tend to unite swiftly and unconditionally when confronted with injustice or when

protective measures and constitutional safeguards are threatened.

This very dialectic fracture and unity, conflict and solidarity is embedded in the characters of the play. Satish, Arjun, Kaka, and Shewanta each represent distinct Dalit voices, though Shewanta remains largely in the background. Together, they dramatize the complex ways in which mobility, refusal, and alternative strategies function as tools of survival and resistance. Mobility, in particular, emerges as a recurring motif. Both Kaka and Arjun are constantly on the move, embodying the restless energy of grassroots activism. Arjun's negligible college attendance reflects his deep involvement in local social groups organizing meetings, participating in protest marches, and frequently visiting Satish's home to confer with Kaka. His activism initially centers on securing justice for Dalit flood victims, which he and Kaka achieve through forceful action. Their movements escalate as they prepare to counter upper-caste attempts to seize housing meant for victims. Arjun's activism even stretches to Mumbai, where he seeks official approval and mobilizes community resources, albeit through questionable, even corrupt, methods.

Kaka, in contrast, represents continuity with history. As a veteran who worked alongside Ambedkar and participated in the freedom movement, he commands respect in the community. He also serves as a mentor to Arjun, yet remains unafraid to challenge him in debates with Satish. Their disagreements are not simply ideological they illustrate the difficulty of reconciling lived experience, ethical principles, and pragmatic strategies within the Ambedkarite framework. The debates staged in Satish's home thus provide audiences with a microcosm of grassroots Ambedkarite politics: a constant churn of discussion, disagreement, and strategizing that keeps the movement alive. The climax intensifies this motif of movement. After violent clashes erupt between Dalits and

upper-caste groups, Arjun becomes a fugitive, hiding to prove his innocence before eventually being arrested. Satish, by contrast, does not physically move as much within the play, but he remains active in a quieter, less visible way. He monitors village tensions, attempts to halt a protest march to prevent bloodshed, and pursues legal avenues for justice by seeking housing loans for the flood victims. His less conspicuous movements may be underplayed in the script, but they suggest a strategic counterpoint to Kaka and Arjun's activism. Satish embodies the legalistic, reform-oriented dimension of Ambedkarism, whereas Kaka and Arjun represent its militant, action-driven spirit.

Rebellion/Revolt and Rejection (Refusal) as Beauty

The aesthetic force of Dalit drama lies primarily in its articulation of rebellion and rejection, both of which serve as core elements of its cultural expression. The Ambedkarite tradition situates rebellion not merely as a reaction, but as an epistemic rupture against the oppressive socio-political structures that institutionalize caste hierarchies. Ambedkar's thought insists that *Dalit liberation* is impossible without a fundamental revolt against the system that perpetuates their enslavement. "Dalit in his leadership understood that their slavery could not be ended without revolting against it. They revolted against every institutionalized object responsible for their untouchability and dehumanized state." (Bhowate, 2025: 273) *Rebellion,* then, is not spontaneous it is historically conscious, rooted in the recognition that gradual reform within the caste order is insufficient to secure justice.

This dialectic of *rebellion and rejection* finds dramatic representation in the play under discussion. The event of flood victims forcibly occupying houses symbolizes a rebellion against the socio-political barriers that disguise themselves as bureaucratic processes but are in fact instruments of caste exclusion. Arjun's declaration to Professor Satish "We settled

the affair today, in our own way. We forcibly broke the locks open and gave the houses to the flood victims" (Mee, 2017: 301) captures the deliberate choice of direct action when the Dalit community realizes that local politics, dominated by upper-caste actors, intends to deprive them of rightful ownership. Here, rebellion is framed not as lawlessness but as an act of necessity, a counter-strategy against institutionalized deception. Satish's cautious legalism, in contrast, reflects the paradox faced by oppressed groups: whether to remain within the framework of legality, which is often complicit with caste power, or to reject it through insurgent praxis. Arjun's response "I want to trample on those who pretend to be reformers… I have chosen my path, sir, consciously. With my reason intact" (Mee, 2017: 303) highlights *rebellion* as a rational, conscious choice, rather than an impulsive reaction. His readiness to face prison underscores the Ambedkarite insistence on struggle as the price of dignity.

Alongside rebellion, Dalit literature equally emphasizes rejection as a mode of resistance. Ambedkar's own symbolic act of burning *the Manusmriti* exemplifies the rejection of Hindu orthodoxy that institutionalized caste stratification. Dalit literary expression thus develops a tendency to renounce cultural, religious, and traditional elements that legitimize oppression. Sharankumar Limbale rightly observes that rejection in Dalit literature is "double-edged rejecting the unequal order, and demanding equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice," functioning as a form of "just remedy." (Limbale, 2018: 31)

In '*Routes and Escape Routes'*, this rejection manifests through both subtle gestures and overt acts of defiance. For instance, Kaka's remark "I have no taste for the idle antics of the Brahmins" (Mee, 2017: 295) though delivered casually, serves as a psychological counter-attack rooted in his Ambedkarite consciousness. His insistence on reading *'Buddha*

and His Dhamma' rather than Hindu scriptures signals a conscious reorientation of spiritual life away from hegemonic Hinduism towards Buddhist egalitarianism. His correction of Sonal "Yes, Dhamma, not Dharma. Dharma is yours. Ours is Dhamma" (Mee, 2017: 304) is a powerful assertion of cultural autonomy, a rejection of Brahmanical religion and the affirmation of a counter-culture grounded in Ambedkar's *Navayana Buddhism*. The act of organizing 'parayana' around Ambedkar's text is both symbolic and performative: it challenges the monopoly of Hindu sacred traditions while establishing a new ritual framework for Dalit collectivity.

This trajectory of rejection extends to education and social identity. Despite their pursuit of education, Dalits continue to encounter upper-caste prejudice, as exemplified in Dasrao's insult to Arjun: "Can all Mahars be Ambedkars just because they receive an education? You'll never be civilized!" (Mee, 2017: 311). Here, caste ideology seeks to delegitimize Dalit progress by equating education with mimicry rather than transformation. Arjun's angry response "Bloody Brahmin! This bloody Brahmin caste!" reflects not mere personal rage but a broader consciousness of systemic betrayal. His eventual acceptance of his caste identity "Yes, I'm a Dalit. I shall live as a Dalit. And live for Dalits" (Mee, 2017: 312) signals a movement from resentment to affirmation. The play, therefore, becomes a stage where rebellion and rejection are not isolated acts but interconnected strategies of resistance. Rebellion challenges external structures of oppression, while rejection dismantles internalized forms of subjugation. Together, they form the aesthetic and political grammar of Dalit theatre, echoing Ambedkar's radical vision of social transformation.

Alternative Strategies as a Tool of Survival

In this section, we revisit the chief characters of Datta Bhagat's *'Routes and Escape Routes'*. Each character adopts a

particular 'route' shaped by their ideological foundation, cultural practice, and political motivation. Their 'survival strategies' and chosen 'methods' create both possibilities and clashes, as they often disagree on how to respond to social realities. Every character works with a clear target in mind, yet only a few demonstrate consistent conviction and a vision for the future. Others, though seemingly more active and constantly in motion, often lose touch with their core ideological roots, becoming driven instead by immediate effects and short-term outcomes.

Kaka, Arjun, and Satish, though from the same Dalit community, reveal striking differences in how they perceive situations and choose methods. Hema, coming from an upper-caste background, aligns herself with the Ambedkarite cause through constant intervention and guidance, showing her commitment beyond caste identity. On the other hand, Dasrao Guruji, despite presenting himself as a progressive freedom fighter, repeatedly exposes his casteist mindset, revealing how his survival strategy operates within the upper-caste superstructure. Bhagat's use of such 'dichotomy' between routes and strategies highlights the deep ideological and cultural divisions at work. The hope of Ambedkarite vision glimmers in Satish and Hema's inter-caste marriage, but the tragedy of Sonal's lost love reminds us that routes toward emancipation remain fraught with setbacks.

Kaka represents the 'first generation' the veterans of the Dalit movement who once marched shoulder to shoulder with Dr. Ambedkar. His route is guided by '*devout Ambedkarite-Buddhist values'*, firmly believing in legal and ethical transformation. His survival strategy lies in collective activism and constant engagement with his community, even in his old age. Yet, in practice, he sometimes bends moral rules for the sake of rehabilitation and survival. For instance, Kaka arranges a 'forged teaching certificate' for Shewanta, a widow, to help

her join the D. Ed program. This act, though illegal, reflects his survival strategy of extending help where the system has failed. His weakness, however, lies in misjudging people failing to recognize Satish's rational adoption of Ambedkarism and overlooking Arjun's opportunism until it is too late. By grooming Arjun as a leader, Kaka invests in a flawed route, leading to riots and bloodshed. His story shows how a survival method rooted in compassion but lacking critical foresight can collapse under crisis.

Arjun Jadhav, representing the 'third generation', embodies youthful energy and radical impulse. His chosen route is one of 'direct, confrontational action', disregarding institutional methods and leaning instead on disruption. His survival strategy stems from deep frustration with systemic failures he believes that constitutional safeguards are diverted or controlled by upper-caste machinery for Dalits, and therefore, forceful assertion becomes necessary. His methods include breaking the locks of flood-relief houses to redistribute them, ignoring government procedure. In his confrontation with Satish, Arjun insists that Ambedkarism requires uncompromising struggle, even if it means "mobocracy." This radical route grants him visibility and short-term gains, but it risks instability and violence. Arjun's survival strategy, while vibrant, remains ungrounded in long-term vision, making him both a symbol of resistance and a cautionary figure.

Satish and Hema, belonging to the 'second generation', represent a middle path derived from Buddhis; balancing rational critique, empathy, and institutional engagement. Their route emphasizes 'structural change through lawful and constructive means', informed by *Buddhist moderation.* Their survival strategy lies in inclusivity: helping both Dalit and non-Dalit flood victims, advocating dialogue, and promoting legal recourse rather than violence. Their method is pragmatic. For example, they plan a housing society for flood victims instead

of seizing houses unlawfully. By marrying across caste lines, they embody social transformation in personal life as well. Satish distinguishes between a *'constructive morcha'* and *destructive "mobocracy,"* urging Kaka and Arjun to adopt legal and constitutional methods. Although they cannot prevent the riots out of their disregarding Satish's advises. Towards the end Arjun's act of saving Sonal and Hema's moral guidance restore hope. Satish's and Hema's survival strategy reflects the Ambedkarite path of 'constitutional morality, empathy, and dialogue', even when immediate victories seem elusive.

Dasrao Guruji, though claiming to be a forward-minded freedom fighter, adopts a survival strategy rooted in 'caste privilege and hypocrisy'. His route is performative: in public, he speaks as a progressive; in private, he discriminates. He refuses Satish accommodation because of his Buddhist identity, registers himself for flood-relief housing meant for the poor, and expresses resentment against Dalit reservations. His method is to maintain his upper-caste dominance while appearing progressive a strategy of survival for the privileged class. Unlike Kaka, Arjun, or Satish, his route does not seek transformation but preservation of the caste order under the guise of progressivism.

Through these contrasting routes, Bhagat demonstrates that the Dalit-Ambedkarite movement is not a monolith but a field of diverse strategies.

- Kaka's route shows 'ethical activism compromised by survival needs'.
- Arjun's route reveals the 'power and danger of radical activism'.
- Satish and Hema embody the 'middle path of rational pragmatism and empathy'.
- Dasrao's route exposes the 'hollow progressivism of caste elites.

The play underscores that survival strategies are not uniform they are contested, fragmented, and often in conflict. Yet, within these clashes lies the Ambedkarite search for dignity, justice, and equality.

Structure and Dramatic Techniques:

Datta Bhagat's *'Routes and Escape Routes'* stands as a representative text of "*Ambedkarite Dalit Theatre*", blending ideological critique with formal experimentation. As discussed earlier, Dalit theatre grew out of performative traditions like "Tamasha", with its sharp dialogic exchanges, and "street theatre", which relied on minimal stage setup and direct audience engagement. While its mature forms crystallized in the 1970s and 1980s, its roots can be traced to Mahatma Phule's *'Tritiya Ratna'* (1855) and M. B. Chitnis's '*Yugyatra'* (1955). They are neither Shakespearean romances nor tragi-comedies; while they contain elements of love, loss, and laughter, their "central focus remains on social conflict, caste oppression, and the Ambedkarite quest for justice".

In Bhagat's play, Dr. Ambedkar's ideological presence is palpable, structuring the characters' routes, survival strategies, and methods. The dramatic tension arises through a series of 'conflicts': generational conflict (Kaka, Satish, Arjun), social and caste conflict (Dalits vs. upper castes), ideological conflict (Ambedkarism vs. hollow progressivism), and methodological conflict (lawful protest vs. mobocracy). By foregrounding these layered confrontations, the play exemplifies the Ambedkarite mode of drama as 'a site of contestation and negotiation'.

Structure of the Play: Acts, Scenes, and Time Span

The play is divided into 'two acts and five scenes', covering a span of 'eight months and fifteen days'. Significantly, all events unfold in a 'single setting the home of Professor Satish Godghate' which lends the play both unity of place and an

intimate focus. Each scene begins with crucial information that connects it seamlessly to the next, creating a sense of continuity while deepening the conflict.

- "Act I, Scene I" functions as the *'exposition'*: all major characters Kaka, Satish, Arjun, Dasrao Guruji, and Hema are introduced. The central problem (housing for Dalit flood victims) and the law-and-order tension are also presented. The closing moment Arjun's arrest for instigating forced possession of houses sets the tone of conflict.
- 'Scene II' (two months later) heightens the '*rising action'*. Another major character Sonal enters, bringing in an emotional subplot of youthful love and disillusionment. Dasrao Guruji's hypocrisy as a self-styled progressive is further exposed. Ideological clashes intensify, with Kaka and Arjun advocating direct action, while Satish warns against riots. The 'methodological conflict' between lawful protest and violent assertion dominates.
- 'Act II, Scene I' (next morning) marks the *'climax':* communal riots erupt, Shewanta is killed, and Kaka is seriously injured. Kaka's trust in Arjun collapses when he realizes Arjun's corruption. This discovery marks both personal and ideological betrayal, making the climax deeply tragic.
- 'Act II, Scene II' (fifteen days later) depicts the *'falling action'*. Kaka withdraws from Arjun, turning inward to personal worship before Buddha. The after-effects of the riot are shown through student protests against Satish, while Arjun is falsely accused of Shewanta's death. The scene closes with Kaka's tragic collapse during an intense argument with Arjun, sealing the generational rupture.
- 'Act II, Scene III' (six months later) provides the *'resolution'*. Hema symbolically takes over Kaka's ritual of offering flowers to Buddha, while her pregnancy signals renewal

and continuity. Arjun, arrested after month's underground, is defended by Satish once it is revealed that he had saved Sonal during the riots. The play thus ends with a reaffirmation of *'Ambedkarite faith'* a constructive, compassionate approach to social struggle grounded in solidarity.

Dramatic Techniques and Devices

Bhagat employs several technical devices to reinforce the play's thematic depth:

1.**Flashback:**

- Kaka recalls his participation in Ambedkar-led movements, situating his route in the historical continuum.
- Satish refers to the Mahad Satyagraha (1927), invoking Ambedkar's calm yet resolute methodology.
- Hema recalls her inter-caste marriage and hardships, exposing the personal cost of breaking caste norms.

2. Single Setting:

By staging all events in Satish's home, the play achieves unity and underscores how caste conflicts infiltrate even the most intimate domestic spaces.

3. "Subplot (Shewanta)":

Though never appearing on stage, 'Shewanta's subplot' is crucial in exposing the double oppression of Dalit women. A widow aspiring to be a teacher, she is initially supported by Kaka through an illegally arranged certificate. However, Arjun soon asserts control, 'evicting her from housing and silencing her when she questions his handling of relief funds'. In this way, she becomes a 'victim of male domination', her voice suppressed under the guise of activism. Her tragic death in the

riots symbolizes how Dalit women often bear the harshest consequences of both caste oppression and patriarchal exploitation within their own community.

4. 'Symbolism:

i. The Buddha Idol:

The Buddha idol symbolizes both 'Ambedkarite ideology and spiritual refuge'. It's shifting role from a community emblem to Kaka's private devotion, and finally to Hema's daily offering mirrors the generational routes of Ambedkarism. Initially, the idol was meant for the community vihara, representing collective struggle. However, when Kaka realized Arjun's corrupt ways, he withdrew from him and refused to let the idol be misused in hollow programmes such as the house-allotment ceremony. The idol, therefore, becomes a marker of 'authentic faith versus opportunistic display', underlining the struggle to preserve Ambedkarite ideals amidst political corruption.

i. Hema's Pregnancy:

At the resolution, Hema's pregnancy symbolizes 'renewal, continuity, and hope', reinforcing Ambedkarite futurity. It suggests the survival of Ambedkarism beyond tragedy, death, and disillusionment. Her pregnancy signifies that even when older generations collapse under betrayal and loss, the ideals of equality and justice are carried forward into new life. This becomes the 'symbol of regeneration' for the community.

ii. Shewanta (the Absent Character):

Shewanta symbolizes the 'silenced Dalit woman, doubly oppressed by caste and patriarchy'. Though she never appears on stage, her presence is strongly felt. Exploited and evicted by Arjun when she questions his misuse of funds, she embodies

how women are often subjected to male domination within the movement itself. Her tragic death in the riots becomes a 'symbol of the failure of corrupt leadership' and highlights the vulnerability of Dalit women, who suffer at the intersection of systemic oppression and patriarchal betrayal.

iii. Flood Relief Houses:

The houses symbolize 'state promises of justice and Dalit rights', but also the corruption, conflict, and desperation surrounding their distribution. They become the 'stage of contention': Kaka and Arjun breaking locks to seize them reflects immediate survival strategies born out of exclusion, while Satish's insistence on legal means reflects the rational and constitutional route of Ambedkarism. The houses thus dramatize the divide between 'short-term assertion and long-term justice'.

iv. Locks and Breaking of Locks

Locks represent 'systemic barriers and exclusion', while the act of breaking them symbolizes 'resistance and assertion of rights'. Yet, breaking locks also carries the risk of chaos when law is disregarded. Arjun's decision to break the locks functions as a double-edged symbol: it asserts Dalit entitlement but also exposes the dangers of reckless, lawless activism that can undermine the very cause it seeks to advance.

v. The Riot and Bloodshed

The riots symbolize the 'fractured nature of movements, the failure of dialogue, and the destructive outcomes of violent methods'. Dramatically, the riot functions as the turning point of the play: it exposes Arjun's corruption, leads to Shewanta's death, and plunges Kaka into disillusionment. The bloodshed becomes a stark reminder that violence often destroys communities from within rather than securing justice.

vi. Kaka's Death

Kaka's death symbolizes the 'end of the first generation of Ambedkarite struggle'. His misplaced trust in Arjun and his tragic disillusionment mark the collapse of his route. Functionally, his death signals a 'generational rupture', transferring the responsibility of sustaining Ambedkarism to Satish and Hema. Kaka's fall becomes both a cautionary tale and a necessary transition to a new phase of the struggle.

vii. Sonal's Lost Love

Sonal's lost love symbolizes 'frustrated desires and the personal sacrifices demanded by caste-ridden society'. Her broken dreams mirror the broader theme of 'failed promises and broken routes' in the Dalit struggle. Through Sonal, the play demonstrates how caste not only denies social justice but also curtails personal freedom and aspirations.

viii. Arjun's Underground Life and Arrest

Arjun's underground life and eventual arrest symbolize 'misdirected youthful energy' dynamic and promising at first, but destructive when unanchored in Ambedkarite principles. His fall into corruption and reckless activism underlines the dangers of adopting routes that prioritize disruption over constructive struggle. His arrest signifies the reassertion of the need for 'lawful, constitutional methods' in contrast to his failed survival strategy.

Levels of Symbolism

The symbolism in the play operates on **three interconnected levels**:

1. **Ideological Symbols:** The Buddha idol, references to Dr. Ambedkar, and the clash between lawful and unlawful routes.

2. **Social Symbols:** Flood relief houses, locks, riots, and caste conflict.

3. **Personal Symbols:** Hema's pregnancy, Shewanta's tragedy, Kaka's death, and Sonal's lost love.

Together, these symbols underscore that survival strategies in the Dalit-Ambedkarite movement are 'contradictory, contested, and fraught with tension'. Yet, despite betrayal, violence, and disillusionment, the play ends with 'symbols of continuity and renewal' affirming Ambedkarism as the guiding light for future generations.

5. Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is an important dramatic device in Datta Bhagat's 'Routes and Escape Routes'. The play uses several anticipatory hints through dialogue, flashbacks, and symbolic actions to prepare the audience for coming conflicts and tragedies. Some foreshadowing in the play could be located as follows:

i. Kaka's Trust in Arjun

Foreshadowing: Kaka repeatedly praises Arjun's activism and places his faith in him as the next leader of the movement. What does it anticipates? This blind trust foreshadows Kaka's eventual disillusionment when Arjun's corruption is exposed during the riots. It hints at the collapse of the "first generation" hope invested in the "third generation."

ii. Arjun's Radical Methods

Foreshadowing: Early in the play, Arjun's insistence on breaking locks and seizing houses shows his tendency towards impulsive and lawless activism. What does it anticipates? This foreshadows the violent riots, the law-and-order breakdown, and his eventual downfall. It signals that his survival strategy will bring chaos rather than constructive results.

iii. Satish's Warning about Mobocracy

Foreshadowing: Satish differentiates between a 'constructive morcha' and destructive mobocracy, warning Arjun that reckless methods could lead to disaster. What does it anticipates? His caution foreshadows the bloody riots, Shewanta's death, and Kaka's collapse all outcomes of uncontrolled agitation.

iv. Shewanta's Struggle (Off-stage Character)

Foreshadowing: References to Shewanta's difficulties her widowhood, her forged certificate, and Arjun's exploitation signal her vulnerability. What it anticipates? These hints foreshadow her tragic death in the riots, which becomes the moral exposure of Arjun's failed leadership.

v. Buddha Idol Kept at Home

Foreshadowing: Kaka decides not to hand over the Buddha idol for the public programme, keeping it at home for private worship. What does it anticipates: This foreshadows both Kaka's withdrawal from public activism and Hema's eventual role in continuing Ambedkarite rituals after his death, symbolizing generational transfer.

vi. Sonal's Lost Hopes in Love

Foreshadowing: Sonal's unfulfilled love story introduced in Act I–II signals her frustration under caste-bound restrictions. What does it anticipates: Her broken dream foreshadows the broader theme of failed routes, paralleling Kaka's collapse and Arjun's downfall.

vii. Student Protest against Satish

Foreshadowing: The students questioning Satish about Arjun's protection indicates discontent brewing within the younger generation. What does it anticipates: This foreshadows Satish's internal dilemma but also his eventual

decision to support Arjun once truth comes out, reaffirming constructive Ambedkarism.

viii. References to Ambedkarite Movements (Flashbacks)

Foreshadowing: Kaka's recollections of Ambedkar's leadership and Satish's reminder of the Mahad Satyagraha highlight the value of calm, legal, and foresighted struggle. What does it anticipates? These memories foreshadow the failure of violent routes (Arjun) and reaffirm the need for Ambedkar's constructive, constitutional method (Satish and Hema). The foreshadowing in 'Routes and Escape Routes' operates on two levels:

i. **Tragic foreshadowing:** Kaka's trust, Arjun's radicalism, Shewanta's struggles, and Sonal's love anticipate disillusionment, riots, and death.

ii. **Hopeful foreshadowing:** The Buddha idol, Satish's warnings, and Ambedkarite flashbacks anticipate the eventual reaffirmation of Ambedkarism through Hema's pregnancy and Satish's rational stance.

iii.

6. Mood/Atmosphere:

Mood/Atmosphere is important for understanding how Datta Bhagat shapes the audience's emotional response in 'Routes and Escape Routes'. The play doesn't keep one fixed tone; instead, its atmosphere shifts with the characters' routes and conflicts.

i. 'Opening: Tension and Unease'

The play begins with the issue of flood relief houses and the breaking of locks by Dalit victims, setting an atmosphere of 'unrest and urgency'. The mood here is one of 'strained hope', where desperation leads to actions that already hint at looming conflict.

ii. Rising Action: Conflict and Agitation

As Kaka, Satish, and Arjun debate their methods, the atmosphere becomes 'heated and argumentative. The dialogues create a mood of 'ideological tension', reflecting generational differences and foreshadowing deeper clashes. Arjun's aggressive energy injects an atmosphere of 'restlessness and volatility', contrasting with Satish's calmer, rational presence.

iii. Interpersonal Undercurrents: Frustration and Disillusionment

With Sonal's introduction, the atmosphere softens briefly into personal longing, but her frustrated love soon creates a mood of disappointment and broken desire. Dasrao Guruji's hypocrisy adds an air of 'cynicism and mistrust', intensifying the atmosphere of betrayal within the social fabric.

iv. Climax: Violence and Despair

The riot scene shifts the atmosphere into one of 'chaos, fear, and tragedy'. Shewanta's death and Kaka's injury create a mood of 'grief and devastation', exposing the destructive outcome of violent methods. The disillusionment of Kaka at this point casts a 'tragic, heavy atmosphere' across the stage.

v. Falling Action: Introspection and Guilt

After the riot, the mood shifts to mourning and reflection. Kaka's distancing from Arjun and his turn to private worship creates a subdued, melancholic atmosphere. Student protests against Satish intensify the sense of pressure and doubt, generating a mood of internal conflict.

vi. Resolution: Renewal and Hope

The final scene, with Hema offering flowers to the Buddha and her pregnancy revealed, shifts the atmosphere to one of 'peace and continuity'. While Arjun's arrest adds a note

of uncertainty, Satish's decision to support him injects a mood of 'cautious optimism'. The play closes with an atmosphere of 'hopeful renewal', suggesting that Ambedkarism endures despite setbacks.

The atmosphere of 'Routes and Escape Routes' moves 'from tension → agitation → despair → renewal', mirroring the 'routes of survival' chosen by the characters:

- 'Conflict and chaos in Arjun's radicalism.
- 'Disillusionment and sorrow' in Kaka's collapse.
- 'Calm but firm optimism' in Satish and Hema's constructive Ambedkarism.

Thus, the play's mood embodies the 'contradictions of the Dalit-Ambedkarite movement' fraught with betrayal and tragedy, yet always carrying the possibility of hope and continuity.

Broader Implications of 'Routes and escape Routes'

'Routes and Escape Routes' is one of the most important Dalit plays in Marathi theatre, and its contribution to 'Dalit aesthetics' is significant. It not only stages caste realities but also experiments with form, structure, and symbolism to develop a distinct *'Ambedkarite theatrical expression'*. Let us discuss Contributions of 'Routes and Escape Routes'; to Dalit Aesthetics:

i. Foregrounding Ambedkarite Ideology as Aesthetic Core

Unlike mainstream Indian theatre, where Dalits were often peripheral characters, Bhagat places 'Ambedkarism at the centre of dramatic form. The play's entire structure, generational conflict (Kaka, Satish, and Arjun), ideological clashes, and resolution revolves around 'different routes of Ambedkarite survival'. This makes Ambedkarite thought not

just a theme but a 'theatrical aesthetic principle', shaping character, conflict, and resolution.

ii. Fusion of Folk and Street Theatre Traditions

Bhagat draws from *'Tamasha'* (folk theatre) and 'street plays', which emphasize sharp dialogues, direct confrontation, and minimal sets. This fusion creates a performance style rooted in 'Dalit popular culture', breaking away from Sanskritised or elite forms of theatre. In doing so, Bhagat democratizes theatre, making it a medium accessible to and reflective of Dalit lived experiences.

iii. Use of Symbolism with Social Realism

Dalit aesthetics here balance realism with layered symbolism: Buddha idol indicates Ambedkarite values, shifting generationally, Flood houses and locks indicates, and state promises and systemic barriers. Hema's pregnancy envisions continuity and hope. Symbols are not abstract but 'directly tied to caste struggles', giving Dalit theatre its own visual and emotional vocabulary.

iv. Centering Subaltern Voices and Silences

Shewanta, though absent from stage, symbolizes the 'silenced Dalit woman', doubly oppressed by caste and patriarchy. Her subplot critiques not only caste society but also male dominance within the movement itself. This aligns with Dalit aesthetics' commitment to exposing layered oppression rather than reproducing elite narratives.

v. Conflict as Aesthetic Structure

The play thrives on multiple conflicts: Generational (Kaka vs. Satish vs. Arjun), Ideological (legalism vs. radicalism vs. hypocrisy), Social (Dalits vs. caste society) and Dalit aesthetics here emphasize 'conflict over harmony', reflecting the real conditions of caste society where survival itself is a struggle.

vi. Breaking Classical Genres

The play is neither tragedy nor comedy; instead, it mixes tragedy (Shewanta's death, Kaka's collapse) and hope (Hema's pregnancy, Buddha worship). By refusing to fit into classical categories like tragi-comedy or romance, it asserts a 'distinct Dalit genre', shaped by the politics of oppression and assertion.

vii. Ethical and Political Closure

The resolution does not offer escapist catharsis. Instead, it ends with 'renewal of faith in Ambedkarism' through Satish and Hema. Dalit aesthetics here emphasize 'constructive hope' amidst devastation, reflecting Ambedkar's call for social democracy as an ongoing project.

Role of Routes and Escape Routes in Reshaping Indian Dramaturgy:

Datta Bhagat's 'Routes and Escape Routes' plays a crucial role in 'reshaping Indian dramaturgy' by breaking away from elite, Sanskritised, and Eurocentric models of theatre to establish an *'Ambedkarite Dalit stage practice'*. Rooted in folk traditions like *'Tamasha'* and in the immediacy of street theatre, the play redefines dramatic form through its focus on 'caste conflict, generational struggles, and survival strategies' rather than classical notions of tragedy or comedy. Its symbolic framework such as the Buddha idol, the flood relief houses, and Shewanta's off-stage presence; expands the vocabulary of Indian theatre to articulate subaltern experiences. By centering Dalit lives, exposing contradictions within social movements, and closing with a constructive reaffirmation of Ambedkarism, Bhagat moves Indian dramaturgy away from abstract universals toward a 'politically engaged, socially grounded aesthetic'. In doing so, he helps reorient Indian theatre into a space where 'marginal voices reshape both form and content, creating a new trajectory for modern dramaturgy.

Relevance of the play in contemporary debates on caste, justice, and identity

Datta Bhagat's '*Routes and Escape Routes'* remains deeply relevant to contemporary debates on 'caste, justice, and identity' as it dramatizes the fractures within Dalit movements, the persistence of caste prejudice, and the dilemmas of survival strategies. The play's conflicts between lawful protest and radical action, between ethical leadership and corruption, and between caste privilege and Ambedkarite assertion mirror ongoing tensions in present-day struggles for social justice. Issues like the misuse of reservation debates, the silencing of Dalit women, and the search for authentic leadership continue to resonate today. By combining symbolic depth with social realism, Bhagat's play not only reflects the challenges of his time but also offers a 'critical lens for examining how Ambedkarite thought informs identity politics and justice movements in contemporary India'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Datta Bhagat's 'Routes and Escape Routes' emerges as a landmark text that "unveils Dalit resistance through layered philosophical and theoretical dimensions". The key findings of our discussion reveal that the play

(i) The play dramatizes 'multiple survival routes from Kaka's ethical Ambedkarism, to Arjun's radical activism, Satish and Hema's rational pragmatism, and Dasrao's hypocritical allyship thus exposing the diversity and tension within Dalit struggles;
(ii) The play employs *'powerful symbols'* such as the Buddha idol, flood relief houses, and Hema's pregnancy to represent the ideological, social, and personal dimensions of resistance;
(iii) The play uses *'dramatic techniques'* like foreshadowing, symbols, flashback, and absent-character subplots

(e.g., Shewanta) to deepen the critique of caste and patriarchy

(iv) The play reshapes *'Indian dramaturgy'* by rejecting elite forms and forging an Ambedkarite aesthetic grounded in folk traditions, street theatre, and social realism.

Bhagat's play insists on reading resistance not as a single linear path but as a 'contested field of routes', where ideological conviction, corruption, gendered silences, and generational shifts constantly clash. This makes the play relevant not only as a cultural product of the 1980s Dalit movement but also as a 'mirror to contemporary debates' on caste, justice, and identity. Ultimately, 'Routes and Escape Routes' positions Ambedkarism as the guiding light that binds fragmented struggles into a philosophy of renewal, showing how theatre can function as both a site of 'political intervention and cultural healing'.

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Seven.
P. Sivakami's the Grip of Change: Dalit Feminist Standpoint

Introduction

Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful response to the caste-based discrimination that has plagued India for centuries. It passionately addresses issues like social injustice, poverty, hunger, and the struggle for cultural and political identity. However, this literary movement often overlooks the perspectives of women, particularly Dalit women, who face dual oppression both from societal discrimination and patriarchal structures. One notable work that sheds light on these issues is *"The Grip of Change,"* a novel that focuses on the life of a Dalit woman, exploring the intricacies of the caste system and the patriarchal constraints within her own community and family. This novel also critiques so-called Dalit leaders, exposing those who exploit their community for personal gain. By putting the spotlight on caste discrimination, *"The Grip of Change*" serves as a significant critique of such fraudulent leadership. The aim of this research paper is to examine the feminist themes within the novel and establish a Dalit feminist perspective based on those themes.

"The Grip of Change" marks the debut of P. Sivakami, a Dalit woman writer, in the Tamil language. An Indian Administrative Service officer, she published her first novel, originally titled "*Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum,"* in 1989. This work

sparked considerable debate in both Tamil and English literary circles due to its bold portrayal of Dalit issues. The author herself translated it into English in 2006, and it was well accepted within Dalit literary communities. The novel reveals the complex layers of the caste system that oppresses Dalits, particularly highlighting the excruciating reality of Dalit women in Indian society and within their families. What sets this novel apart is its intertextual connections with other Dalit literary works across the nation. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Sivakami critiques the Dalit literary movements and the leadership that often claims to represent the community. While she vividly depicts the atrocities inflicted by upper-caste Hindus and the sufferings of Dalits, she goes further to unveil the emptiness of Dalit leadership and their often selfish motives. Though the movement began in the 1960s with Marathi Dalit writers offering narratives of heroic resistance against casteism and poverty, some ignorant Dalit leaders exploit their own people for their benefit.

In this context, *"The Grip of Change"* serves as a significant rebuke to such false leaders while maintaining a firm focus on caste discrimination. Sivakami's critical stance toward these leaders doesn't just signal an end to her analysis it foretells a crucial change in leadership driven by capable youth. By the conclusion of the novel, this shift is realized, achieving its aim of denouncing corrupt attitudes and depicting such characters as weak and unworthy within the text.The Grip of the Change catches the attention of the reader and critic for another special reason. Its sequel *The Authors Notes (1997)* was written about eight years later. With plenty of autobiographical references, this sequel is the authors own critical approach as a feminist to her novel which deconstructs it to bring new dimensions out of it. This novel also succeeds in developing the dalit feminist standpoint through the female protagonist Gowri (who might be author herself!). *Psychoanalysis* is also another way of approach in the sequel, scanning each action of the characters

through their subconscious mind and at times the writer does not even spare herself as a critic. The sequel portrays psychological urges from feminine sensitivity towards freedom and identity. The writer locates the truth unsparingly to her own identity.

Dalit Feminism

Dalit literature stands as a powerful movement of protest, deeply influenced by the ideals of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Rooted in *humanism,* it seeks social transformation to attain liberty, equality, fraternity, social justice, and equal opportunity. This form of literature gives voice to countless oppressed individuals who have suffered under caste-based discrimination. Initially, Dalit literature focused on themes such as caste oppression, poverty, hunger, and the socio-economic, cultural, and political identities of marginalized groups. Sadly, during its emergence, the struggles of women were often overlooked. Dalit women face dual oppression firstly from the caste system and secondly from patriarchal structures within their families. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the position of women in the social hierarchy correlates directly with the degree of their exploitation, laying the groundwork for Dalit feminism. Dalit women juggle household responsibilities while also venturing into the workforce for daily wages. Their economic vulnerability makes them targets for exploitation by upper-caste men, who often abuse them without remorse. Within their own homes, they may find their husbands seizing their wages and physically abusing them to assert dominance. Throughout their lives, women face public humiliation and violence, not just from their partners but also from fathers and brothers, grappling with the harsh realities of a patriarchal society.

While Dalit male writers portray women in their narratives, these representations frequently fall short lacking depth, significance, and completeness. However, many women

writers have drawn inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's commitment to the Dalit cause, including Mukta Sarvagaud, Shantabai Kamble, Bebi Kamble, Kumud Pawade, and Mallika Amarsheikhin in Maharashtra, as well as Bama and Sivakami. These writers share their personal experiences and insights into systems that perpetuate female subordination. Their narratives represent the authentic struggles of Dalit women, revealing their pain both in public and private spheres. The characters crafted by Dalit women writers tend to be more complex and rebellious, demonstrating a stronger understanding of their circumstances than their male counterparts. Their determined perspectives shed light on the challenges faced by Dalit women, forming the foundation for Dalit feminist discourse, particularly evident in P. Sivakami's "The Grip of Change." Bama also powerfully articulates this viewpoint in her novel "Sangathi:

> "Dalit women's dual oppression on account of gender and caste is depicted in great detail. Sangati is a feminist narrative wherein Bama endeavors to expand feminist agenda to enlist caste oppression as a subject of concern. Bama regards herself as a Dalit feminist and has emphasized the need for formula of a Dalit feminist standpoint. Feminist agenda has to eschew of its bourgeois, elitist bias and evaluate Dalit cause within its framework' (Mangalam, 2007)

In *"The Grip of Change,"* the harsh realities faced by women are depicted with striking honesty. The opening scene of the novel is particularly impactful: Thangam, a Dalit widow, approaches Kathamuthu, a local Dalit leader and the story's protagonist, in a state of severe distress after being brutally attacked by members of the upper-caste Udayars. Accused by them of being the concubine of Paranjothi Udayar, she seeks Kathamuthu's help. Skeptical of her story, he prompts her to share the truth, leading to a shocking revelation.

> "Sami. Is there anywhere on earth where this doesn't happen? I didn't want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all he is my paymaster. He measures my rice..." (Sivakami, 2007: 7)

Her statement reveals a profound sense of helplessness and isolation. Udayar exploits her, leaving her with no choice but to give in to his desires whenever he wants. When Udayar's wife discovers the affair, she retaliates violently, along with a relative, attacking Thangam in her own home. Despite the commotion, none of the onlookers, not even her family, offer her help. One relative coldly remarks, "She deserves this and more! She seduced Udayar... shameless woman... while ignoring all of us, she found comfort in him!" (Sivakami, 2007: 26).

Ultimately, Thangam seeks refuge with Kathamuthu, who initially provides her with shelter and manages to secure some compensation for her after an inquiry. However, her trust in him is shattered when he drugs and assaults her. Once again, she finds herself trapped, forced to remain his mistress. Thangam approached him with the respect of a sister, but he betrays that trust. In her drugged state, she murmurs, "You are like a brother to me... a brother..." (Sivakami, 2007: 93). This transformation turns Thangam into a victim of circumstance, manipulated and abused by a system that exploits her.

When Kathamuthu's daughter, Gowri, unexpectedly arrives and realizes the situation, she is horrified and cries out, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" (Sivakami, 2007: 93). Through the depiction of Kathamuthu's oppressive nature, corruption, and polygamous relationships, Sivakami illustrates a broader truth: powerful men often lead tragic personal lives. The vivid representation of Kathamuthu and the women entwined with him unveils the harsh reality of Dalit patriarchy.

Gowri and her Mothers:

In the novel, we meet Kathamuthu and his two wives, Kanagavali and Nagamani, along with Kanagavali's children, Gowri and Sekaran. Nagamani, an upper-caste widow disenchanted with her community and family, chooses to marry Kathamuthu, despite his lower-caste status. She enters the household with nothing from her past life and seeks shelter with him. Kanagavali, fearful of her husband, feels powerless to protest but, being kind-hearted, accepts Nagamani and makes room for her in their home. Unlike Udayar's wife, who mistreats Thangam, Kanagavali empathizes with Nagamani's plight. She adjusts to sharing her husband without causing great discord, though they occasionally quarrel; these disputes are resolved quickly. This dynamic highlights a significant contrast between Dalit women and upper-caste women: the upper-caste woman often adopts a prideful, unsympathetic attitude shaped by her social hierarchy, while the Dalit woman exhibits openness and compassion toward the oppressed.

Gowri, a pivotal character, begins as a child in the novel and evolves into a young woman by its conclusion, at the age of thirty-one. Throughout the narrative, she witnesses key events in her family's life. As a girl, she faces challenges at home, particularly from her father. At one point, he harshly criticizes her for still clinging to her mother, suggesting she is too dependent. When she begins attending school, she encounters harsh realities of caste discrimination. The Panchayat Union School becomes known derisively as the *"Parayar School,"* a reflection of prejudice as no upper-caste families send their children there, a fact that leaves Gowri taken aback. Despite her dedication to her studies, she lives under her father's threat of marriage if she doesn't excel in her exams. Fortunately, she passes and advances to college, where she mingles with a vibrant group of bright, attractive girls. As she navigates this new environment, she becomes acutely aware of

caste biases and feels embarrassed about applying for scholarships, unlike many of her peers. At college, she begins to connect with fellow Scheduled Caste students. One day, she poses a question to one of her classmates, seeking clarity on her experiences.

> Aren't from a scheduled caste? Gowri enquired
> Nonesense! I am a Vanniyakula Kshatriya.
> 'If you are not from a scheduled caste, just say so! Why do you have prefix a 'nonsense'? Shall I repeat to others what you told me' (Sivakami, 2007: 95)

Gowri finds herself drawn into an unexpected argument, surprised by her own fierce spirit. As a bright Dalit student, she responds with equal intensity when faced with disrespect. The novelist illustrates the transformation taking place within Gowri, as her growing outrage against injustice both at home and beyond begins to define her identity. This awareness extends to the injustices faced by others. When a dispute arises between her father and her uncle, Kalimuthu, over their inheritance, Gowri can't stand by idly. Overwhelmed by emotions, she reacts with anger, yet grapples with confusion and sadness at the unfolding drama. Despite the turmoil, she maintains a friendly relationship with her cousin, Chandran. He's a sharp young man who gets a job at a nearby rice mill, where he quickly rises to become a union leader, bursting with fresh ideas for social reform. Following his father's passing, the union turns into his life's purpose. As time passes, Gowri completes her doctoral research and embarks on a teaching career, reaching the age of thirty-one by the novel's conclusion. Through the years, she becomes increasingly reflective, nurturing a deep-seated resentment towards her father. This resentment comes to a head when he pressures her into marriage, and she defiantly responds,

> The suffering that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some

> man... moreover; I need a father who can respect his son-in-law (Sivakami, 2007: 124)

She has become self-sufficient, enhancing her perception and insight. What motivated the author to revisit her novel through her notes? It's rare for authors to critically reflect on their own work; many find it easier to respond to readers' criticism instead. P. Sivakami stands apart from her peers by choosing to re-examine her novel in order to clarify her own feelings about it. For nearly a decade, various questions have lingered in her mind, leading her to grapple with doubts and uncertainties regarding the portrayal of certain characters. She sought reassurance about whether she had represented these characters fairly. In the preface to her novel, she expresses:

> After about ten years, I went back to my novel as a third person, with the hope that I could see the author more objectively...to my surprise, in spite of my efforts to analyze the novel critically, I found that I had actually ended up justifying my views. Thus the novel, The Grip of Change, is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste and the 'women' who was inextricably involved in the process." (Sivakami, 2007: vii)

By sharing her thoughts, she not only separates herself from the first book but also engages in a critical self-reflection, effectively shutting the door on inquisitive minds. She asserts, "I have both the questions and the answers." But if we have more inquiries about Gowri's journey, who do we turn to? For example, when Gowri chooses to decline marriage, is it simply a reflection of her mother's experiences? Or does it signify a courageous step away from the victimhood her mother endured? Could it be an expression of her own independence?

Gowri has little patience for her father's two defining traits: his polygamous lifestyle and his harsh demeanor. The opposing ideals of monogamy and sophistication are often

seen as markers of human evolution towards 'civilization.' Is Gowri's quest for liberation an attempt to 'civilize' Kathamuthu? In pursuing this, what biases might she inadvertently harbor? How does the concept of primitivism influence their father-daughter dynamics? Moreover, has modernism historically only resonated with women of the 'upper' castes? When the margin becomes the center, every word transforms into a battleground. What sets Sivakami apart is her refusal to persuade; she simply moves forward.

Conclusion

'The Grip of Change' explores the intricacies of caste-based issues at their core. The author not only highlights the dominance of the Hindu caste system but also sheds light on various complex problems prevalent in South India. Notably, she addresses concerns often overlooked by other Dalit writers, particularly those affecting Dalit women. Through the characters of Gowri and Chandran, the narrative critiques the patriarchal structures within the Dalit community. Gowri's refusal to conform to traditional marriage expectations and Sekaran's firm response to his father's demands reduce Kathamuthu to a figure of weakness and emptiness. Kathamuthu embodies the local leader who, lacking depth, benefits from both sides of the fray, but it is Gowri, the female protagonist, who reveals his true nature. This novel lays a robust foundation for Dalit feminism, with Gowri representing not just a character but also the author's own experiences and insights.

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Eight.
Sarcasm in Loknath Yashwant's Poetry: A (Psycho) Analysis

Introduction

Early Dalit poetry focused heavily on illustrating the lives and struggles of Dalits, capturing their consciousness, experiences in marginalized communities, and the dehumanization they faced under Hindu dominance. This period emphasized protest as a primary theme. However, contemporary Dalit poetry appears to be evolving into a new phase, where protest coexists with sharp critique and irony. With the introduction of reservation policies and a growing number of Dalits pursuing higher education, a significant middle class has emerged within the community. Although constitutional measures have reduced overt discrimination, touchability persists in certain regions. Dalits in the workforce frequently encounter injustice and subtle biases from upper-caste employers. Many Dalit intellectuals report witnessing sophisticated forms of discrimination in societal and professional environments. Current Dalit writers are now directing their scrutiny toward two specific attitudes: the 'creamy layer' Dalits who distance themselves from their roots in an attempt to conceal their identity often derisively referred to as 'Dalit Brahmins' and the upper-caste individuals who have merely adapted their methods of discrimination. The irony and sharpness in Dalit poetry have sharpened, delivering

powerful critiques. This article examines the work of Loknath Yashwant within this context.

Dalit literature signifies the unity of subaltern Dalits across the nation, serving as a fierce response to the caste-based power structures upheld by Hindu hegemony. Over the past six decades, Dalit literature has developed and is still evolving. Notably, in the last two decades, there has been a significant shift in both style and tone. Some writers, particularly in the realms of poetry and short stories, have introduced refreshing changes that warrant academic exploration. As writers enter this new phase of their genre, it becomes clear that they are approaching their work from diverse perspectives, experimenting with styles and language to convey new meanings. Dalit poets, including Loknath Yashwant, have delved into the styles and forms of poetry that reflect the lives and struggles of the Dalit community. Their work vividly captures the myriad experiences of Dalits, often unfolding through numerous stanzas filled with striking imagery.

In recent times, many writers have opted for brevity, crafting sharp verses that employ sarcasm, irony, and humor to critique their adversaries. In earlier days, the primary opponents were the upper-caste individuals and the overarching influence of Hindu hegemony. However, contemporary Dalit writers have broadened their scope, now also directing their critique toward those within their own community the so-called *"creamy layer"* who distance themselves from their roots. Significant transformations can be observed in Dalit poetry. Esteemed poets like Namdeo Dhasal have wielded sarcasm as a powerful weapon against casteism and Hindu hegemony. In more recent works, Loknath Yashwant has elevated the use of sarcasm to new heights, adapting it to reflect changing societal dynamics.

Sarcasm as a Poetic Device

Poets continually seek innovative devices to effectively communicate their messages to readers, exploring new styles and expressions to create distinctive works. The socio-political climate of the time can heavily influence poetic style. The term *"sarcasm"* originates from the French *"sarcasmor,"* which means "to tear the flesh," paralleling the Greek "sarkazein," meaning "to gnash the teeth."(Device.com 2015) Essentially, sarcasm refers to speaking bitterly or harshly against an individual, event, or idea. It serves as a rhetorical and literary tool for ridicule, aiming to both wound and entertain. When writers grapple with social issues and identify power dynamics or institutional structures as root causes of their troubles, they often respond by critiquing these entities with vigor. At times, undesirable trends infiltrate the socio-cultural fabric, leading individuals to betray their own principles. Such situations prompt writers to address these wrongs through a sarcastic lens, challenging harmful traditions and practices. Throughout English poetry, satire has emerged as a means to critique the flawed policies of rulers and the prevailing norms within society. Alexander Pope's "*The Rape of the Lock*" exemplifies social satire, showcasing a unique take on the genre. Over time, a tradition has developed in which poets use sarcasm and mockery, establishing a regular poetic form that has gained popularity in English literature.

Sarcasm and Psychological Theory

Poets throughout history have consistently criticized misguided cultural norms, social injustices, ill behavior, flawed political choices, and abuses targeted at marginalized groups. They often wield sarcasm and irony as powerful tools in their poetry, which serve a distinct purpose. This approach mirrors our everyday conversations, where sarcasm becomes a typical

reaction to something perceived as wrong. When someone makes a sarcastic remark, it often aims to highlight the mistakes of others, functioning as a form of correction. Language experts note that sarcasm can act as a softer form of insult, helping to deliver criticism with a touch of humor and indirectness.

In the realm of Dalit poetry, poets express profound anger toward the upper caste communities, reflecting this frustration through sharp verbal critiques and insults. This anger arises as a natural response to the sources of oppression they face. Dalit writers hope that such verbal expressions will catalyze meaningful social change. Recent psychological research supports this notion: college students in Israel who listened to sarcastic complaints directed at a cellphone service found that this sarcastic tone facilitated more creative problem-solving compared to straightforward anger. The authors of the study concluded that sarcasm "appears to stimulate complex thinking and to attenuate the otherwise negative effects of anger." This concept can easily extend to poetry infused with sarcasm.

Sarcasm in Dalit Poetry:

Dalit poetry is recognized for its vivid portrayal of the struggles and suffering inherent in Dalit life. It articulates the deep emotions tied to their dehumanized experiences while simultaneously launching vigorous attacks against injustice, inequality, and various dehumanizing forces. Some authors employ biting taunts and bitterness as verbal weapons in their critiques. This use of sarcasm is evident in the work of Namdeo Dhasal, a prominent Dalit poet. His poetry, such as "Song of the Republic and the Dog," vividly captures his anger through a sarcastic lens, effectively illustrating the intensity of his emotions.

Dog, leashed dog
He howls and barks from time to time
This is his constitutional right (Anand, 1992: 68)

Namdeo Dhasal's poem basically portrays the terrible picture of marginalized Dalits life and living conditions. Sarcasm is a very natural reaction for him.

Dalit poetry and Sarcasm in the Last Two Decades

In this decade, Dalit writers are emerging with a deeply rooted tradition of poetry, showing a heightened awareness of how *Liberalization, Globalization*, and *Privatization* impact the lives of Dalits. Concurrently, a growing number of educated Dalits are finding their place in the so-called affluent creamy layer of society. Omprakash Vamiki reflects on this current landscape in his preface to Loknath Yashwant's book*, 'Eylan'*, noting that Dalit literature faces numerous challenges today, many of which come from non-Dalits and individuals who distance themselves from the Ambedkarite movement, feeling ashamed of identifying as Dalits. This creates a compounded set of challenges for the community.

In order for Dalit literature to fulfill its purpose, it must confront these issues head-on. Under these circumstances, the responsibilities of committed writers are more critical than ever. There are those who neglect their obligations to the community they belong to, and Dalit poetry serves as a critique of such mentalities. Emerging Dalit poets boldly articulate their frustrations with these individuals, often employing sarcasm and irony as a means of expression.

Themes in the Poems of Loknath Yashwant

Loknath Yashwant is recognized as a thoughtful Dalit poet. He writes in Vaidarbhi Marathi, a dialect native to Maharashtra. His debut poetry collection, *'Atta Houn Jau Dya' (Let it get over with!),* was published in 1989, introducing a

distinctive style to Dalit poetry. Yashwant followed up with his second collection, '*Aani Shewati Kay Zale*' (And What Happened at the End), in 1995, and then his third, *'Punha Chal Karu Ya!'* (Let's Attack Again...!), in 2009. Notably, his entire first collection was translated into Hindi under the title *'Eylan'* in 2006. Loknath's poetry is deeply rooted in the real-life experiences of Dalits, addressing issues across socio-cultural, educational, economic, and political domains. He draws inspiration from the struggles of laborers in various sectors: factory workers, farmers in agro-markets, masons, porters, building painters, rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, slum dwellers, and poor migrants. His work highlights the injustices and dehumanizing conditions faced by these marginalized communities.

In the introduction to the translated poetry collection *'Eylan'*, Omprakash Valmiki describes Loknath Yashwant as a powerful and rebellious poet. He notes that Loknath's work embodies a unique identity in its expression and the concrete structure of its language. Describing the appeal of his poems, Valmiki emphasizes that the clarity and beauty of the Vaidarbhi Marathi dialect make Loknath's poetry easily accessible to readers.

Sarcasm in the Poetry of Loknath Yashwant:

Loknath Yashwant sets his poetry apart with a distinctive approach, style, and carefully chosen words. His imagery resonates deeply, evoking strong emotions. Through these vivid images, he gives voice to those who have suffered, allowing their struggles and protests to be heard. This ability to express profound feelings is what makes his work stand out. Traditionally, Dalit poetry focused on themes of hunger, poverty, dehumanization, injustice, fury, rejection, and resistance, often lacking the sharpness of sarcasm and irony. Yet, alongside these familiar images lies a battle against systemic oppression. Loknath boldly confronts this oppressive

framework with a biting sarcasm and irony that doesn't shy away from direct confrontation. He suggests that those represented in his poetry are prepared to wage war for their dignity and self-respect. Additionally, what distinguishes Loknath's poetry is its brevity. He opts for precise language and succinct sentences, allowing the reader to reflect and draw their own conclusions without excessive elaboration on the themes he presents.

Various Aspects of Sarcasm in the Poetry of Loknath Yashwant

In Loknath Yashwant's poetry, two distinct mentalities come under scrutiny. On one hand, there are those who adhere to Brahminical ideologies and contribute to Hindu hegemony. On the other, there are Dalits who, despite their background, deliberately distance themselves from the Ambedkarite movement that seeks social change. What's striking is that Loknath wields his sarcasm equally against both groups. Dalit writers often process the A long history of atrocities against their community through a subconscious lens, carrying the weight of injustice and marginalization inflicted by higher castes for generations. This leads them to consciously respond by rejecting oppressive structures and retaliating through their poetry. Loknath's work aligns with this rich tradition of Dalit poetry. To analyze the use of sarcasm in his poems, we must first identify the targets or subjects of his critique.

a. Sarcasm towards individual or the whole structured hegemony
b. Sarcasm towards individual or a class of hypocrite Dalits.

Sarcasm towards individual or the whole structured Hindu Hegemony

Loknath Yashwant skillfully employs sarcasm in his poetry, treating both the oppressed and the oppressors with the same

critical lens. His intent is to convey the opposite of what appears on the surface. When he addresses an individual or critiques the entire system of hegemony, his approach shifts to one that is teasing, mocking, and often stinging. With precision, Loknath selects words that cut deep, targeting both heart and mind.

In his poem *"Economics of Social Planning,"* he responds to the discriminatory practices prevalent in village life. The disparities between high-caste and low-caste individuals are starkly apparent through the use of honorifics. Through his sharp-witted comments, Loknath aims to challenge and disrupt such entrenched mentalities.

> Wife of poor,
> It is the sister-in-law
> Of the whole town,
> An object that can be played with.
> But,
> Wife of Rich
> Becomes the sister,
> Of the whole town. (Yashwant, 2015)

This poem sheds light on the mindset of upper-caste men, highlighting their hostility towards Dalit women while simultaneously being protective of their own. The deliberate creation of honorifics plays a significant role in this dynamic. In another poem, *"A Principled,"* the author strips away the facade of an upper-caste officer who pretends to sympathize with Dalit communities. However, beneath this mask lies a hypocritical and casteist nature, reflecting elitist behavior. Loknath skillfully reveals the attitudes of well-spoken, high-status individuals who perpetuate caste hierarchies, often without even realizing it. With our Highest Sahib

> Chatted in fullest in his cabin
> Marx...Lenin... Mao... Stalin... Charvak
> All touched upon

After a High-fi discussion
Sahib went to officers Toilet
And
We in lobours. (Yashwant, 2015)

The behavior of upper-caste men in India towards Dalits is influenced by socio-economic factors and psychological conditioning. Caste-based discrimination is ingrained in the mindset of upper-caste individuals, who collectively act upon Dalits with a sense of superiority.

In another powerful poem, *"The Direction,"* Loknath reveals the typical mentality of men adhering to Hindu hegemony, illustrating how they exploit their power when Dalits let their guard down. Like a conspirator waiting for prey to become vulnerable, these individuals seize opportunities to act against Dalits. The poem highlights how new policies and amendments are often introduced when Dalits are vigilant, with many unjust policies slipping through unnoticed.

You People!
You and we have different directions
When we lie down
You get up (Yashwant, 2015)

Loknath cleverly crafts a satire that highlights the gullibility of superstitious individuals in India. It's quite simple to mislead people who are deeply religious and prone to believing in magic and unseen forces. When faced with challenges, or even in moments of good fortune fueled by greed, they often rush to consult a fortune teller. Among the various methods of divination, a popular one involves a parrot selecting a card yet no one seems to notice that the poor bird is kept in a cage. In his short poem *'India,'* Loknath uses biting sarcasm to call out those who blindly trust these parrots, serving as a sharp commentary on this widespread belief.

A parrot that sits in a cage

Reveals the fortune of a man (Yashwant, 2018: 39)

Corruption among government officials, NGO representatives, and self-proclaimed social workers is all too common in public life. It becomes especially infuriating when these individuals embezzle funds that were intended for those affected by natural disasters. The depth of this betrayal is poignantly captured in the sarcastic tones of Loknath's poem *'Kabir':*

But, they sell in open markets
Garments gifted to people affected by earthquake
And they are all honourable me. (Yashwant, 2018: 33)

The caste system is fundamentally rooted in hypocrisy, particularly among those who claim to be allies of the Dalits. In the end, Loknath exposes how these individuals subtly perpetuate casteism, manipulating Dalits by maintaining their own hierarchical status. The figure of the butcher serves as a powerful symbol of the upper-caste machinery that masquerades as compassionate, yet ultimately remains complicit in targeting these marginalized communities. In the poem *"Love and Affinity,"* there's a sharp critique directed at such individuals. At the same time, Loknath seeks to enlighten the Dalits about the treachery that often comes from those who seem to support them, shedding light on the insidiousness of upper-caste attitudes toward their plight.

The butcher loves me a lot
True, great love
That's why
He has placed me
At the very end. (Yashwant, 2018: 45)

Loknath has a deep understanding of human psychology, particularly when it comes to white-collar individuals—those who are educated and reside in urban areas. As they climb the

social ladder, many of these individuals feel a sense of embarrassment about their roots. Their parents or relatives, who still exhibit signs of a rural lifestyle through their clothing and behavior, become a source of shame. In their pursuit of status, some of these urban dwellers are willing to abandon their own parents, leaving them in neglected conditions. There have been stories in the news about how some affluent individuals choose to place their parents in old age homes. Ironically, while they might neglect their own family, these same people often lavish attention and affection on their pets as a trend in city life. Loknath powerfully critiques this mentality in his poem 'Question':

> My boss abandoned his parents
> He pets a dog at home
> Takes good care of him
> Even kisses him a lot (Yashwant, 2018: 86)

The social hierarchy in India is a deeply ingrained system, designed to maintain control over marginalized communities while justifying their exploitation through religious narratives. In today's world, thanks to education and constitutional rights, the Dalit community has made significant strides and secured various positions across different sectors. They now approach their rights with vigilance, making it difficult for oppressors to exploit or deceive them. As a result, those who wish to undermine them often bide their time, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Sarcasm towards individual or a class of hypocrite Dalits:

Dalit poets boldly critique not only the overarching power dynamics of Hindu hegemony but also the so-called "creamy layer" within the Dalit community. These individuals often conceal their Dalit identity and distance themselves from their heritage. They show little commitment to the movements

championed by figures like Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha. Through biting satire in their poetry and short stories, these poets have turned the spotlight on such people's shortcomings. In line with this tradition, Loknath Yashwant doesn't hold back in addressing the mindset, cowardice, and hypocrisy of these individuals.

With his unique approach, Yashwant ushers Dalit poetry into a new era, employing a sharp, innovative sarcastic style to confront social evils. In one of his poems, "Vipassana: There Is Nothing to Be Ashamed of," he critiques those who engage in meditation while neglecting pressing political, socio-economic, cultural, and human rights issues. This self-centered layer of so-called middle-class Dalits exhibits a lack of empathy towards their less fortunate counterparts. Ironically, despite their attempts to elevate themselves, they remain unrecognized as equals by upper-caste individuals, yet they persist in viewing themselves as superior to their own community. Yashwant sees such people as hypocrites and betrayers of the Ambedkarite movement.

> You do Vippashana.
> There is nothing to be ashamed of, in it.
> This was bound to happen!
> Due to movement of Babasaheb
> You got the degree, and hooked a descent job.
> Getting grossly overpaid salaries,
> You collected fat on your body.
> You could not sit among higher-ups,
> Still you mix with lowers? (Yashwant, 2015)

Lokanth Yashvant, in his poetry collection *"Without Title,"* offers a powerful reflection on the plight of Dalit individuals. He explores how some of them, driven by a pro-Hindu sentiment and disconnect from their own communities, neglect pressing social issues in a quest for acceptance among higher classes, particularly women. This detachment has led to

a troubling indifference toward the struggles faced by the marginalized.

Despite the existence of constitutional rights, atrocities against Dalits persist and even appear to be on the rise. Vulnerable individuals continue to fall victim to socio-political schemes orchestrated by those in power, fading into obscurity. As a result, a segment of the Dalit population lives with a profound sense of hopelessness, disconnected from their roots and the struggles of their own people. Loknath's work boldly critiques this apathetic mindset. Many Dalit men isolate themselves at home when their community faces oppression from the upper-caste system. Those young Dalit men who find success in their careers and earn substantial salaries often form relationships with Brahmin women, who admire them for turning a blind eye to the struggles of their own people. Loknath's poem *"Without Title"* reflects the predicament of these Dalits, who seem destined to be ensnared by the upper-caste hierarchy.

> Now, I'm insensitive what happen:
> How many casualties in riots?
> How many due to adulteration?
> How many due to mishap?
> Let dozen of them mount
> On a pregnant one, or a bullet set
> Huts, with kids inside, on fire,
> On swords be smeared
> With blood of brawls.
> True, just, I am a living dead
> That's why Madhuri Agnihotri says:
> "Darling... Pandurang Khobragade,
> I love you..." (Yashwant, 2015)

In his poem *"Shopkeeping Mind,"* Loknath distinguishes between those who take action and those who are ineffective. Many leaders within the Dalit community often claim to

support the cause and talk about social change from their platforms. However, such individuals frequently shy away from their responsibilities and the actual work required. Loknath aims to challenge this mentality.

> Several times
> I've tried to convince you
> That, too in mother tongue
> That you
> should not utter the word, 'revolution'
> In vain, wherever, whenever it pleases you.
> Oh! growing moustaches is unbecoming
> For eunuch (Yashwant, 2015)

Loknath recognizes the Dalit activists who were part of significant movements but often find themselves ensnared by the allure of beautiful Brahmin women. These women deftly lead them back to Hinduism and its rituals, practices that many Dalits have consciously left behind since 1956. In an effort to win these women's favor, some activists engage in traditional Hindu ceremonies, all while presenting themselves as secular. Loknath does not hold back from criticizing this double standard among Dalit activists. He exposes the hypocrisy of such individuals in his poem, 'Poem of Bhimrao Meshram':

> She kisses those very lips that have shouted
> Slogans of renaming Marathwada University
> After Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (Yashwant, 2018: 21)

Another instance of Dalit men achieving significant positions within government after overcoming substantial challenges. These individuals are now seen as new icons of Dalit pride, serving as inspirations for future generations. However, their aspirations to rise higher have sometimes led them to comply with the demands of their superiors, who engage in intricate political maneuvers. As a result, they have become scapegoats, and their own community has faced repercussions through them. Regrettably, those who were once

protectors have unintentionally turned into detractors of their own community. Loknath captured this betrayal in his poem titled "Treacherous," highlighting the complexities of ambition and loyalty:

> "Raze all the links in the slum area"
> The order was issued
> Under the Officer Ashok Kamble's graceful, comely
> Signature (Yashwant, 2018: 69)

Loknath Yashwant doesn't hold back when it comes to addressing those in his community who betray the Ambedkarite movement and its ideals. While his sarcasm can be harsh and challenging to swallow, it holds an underlying truth that guides us toward understanding his corrective stance. Loknath's mission to reshape the mindset of his peers is evident through his impactful criticism and sharp wit. As a result, his poetry signifies a new chapter in Dalit literature.

In conclusion, Dalit poets bear the weight of a collective past that spans centuries. This reflects the notion of collective unconscious, similar to what Freud described. The rich tapestry of their experiences is infused with images of Dalitness, marginality, subjugation, injustice, and dominance. Throughout history, Dalit writers have woven their narratives with the fabric of injustice and marginalization, opposing the entrenched power structures rooted in Hindu hegemony. Their collective consciousness brims with resentment toward these systems, and their poetry serves as a powerful outlet for their anguish. Dalit poetry has evolved into a sophisticated means of expressing dissent and rejecting all forms of oppression. The landscape of Dalit poetry transformed significantly in the wake of liberalization, globalization, and related policies introduced in the early 1990s. The oppressors have adopted high-tech mediums, and discrimination has shifted to more insidious forms. In urban environments, inequities manifest not through overt material means but via sophisticated channels. Dalit

poets are acutely aware of these evolving modes of oppression and marginalization, which has prompted them to devise new strategies to combat hegemonic mentalities.

Writers like Loknath Yashwant excel in their use of precise language, brevity, and style. His poetry is marked by a keen use of sarcasm aimed at his adversaries. Not only does he challenge the foes of marginalized communities, but he also unveils the hypocrisy of oppressors and their entrenched systems of power. A new class of elite Dalits has emerged, largely thanks to education and employment opportunities. However, this shift has brought about new challenges for Dalit men at the grassroots level. In contemporary Dalit poetry, elite Dalits are often portrayed as drifting away from their roots, and writers express genuine concern over this troubling trend. Among them, Loknath Yashwant stands out as a promising poet who addresses these sensitive issues with both care and logic.

Loknath Yashwant confronts the hypocritical attitudes of elite Dalit men while subtly proposing corrective solutions. Recent psychological research suggests that a sarcastic tone can sometimes be more effective than a straightforward one in addressing problems, and Loknath intuitively employs this method in his work. His use of humor and sarcasm effectively conveys his message while maintaining its seriousness. Influenced by the legacies of Buddha, Mahatma Phule, and Dr. Ambedkar, Loknath's poetry advocates for societal revolution and change. Though his sarcasm can be biting and harsh, it is aimed at inspiring positive social transformation. In summary, through his unique approach, Loknath Yashwant has elevated the genre of Dalit poetry, making it more impactful with his sharp wit and incisive irony.

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Nine.
From Margins to Metaphor: Archetypes of Oppression in Loknath Yashwant's 'Broken Man'

Introduction

Dalit literature serves as a vital medium for reconstructing the collective memory of marginalized Dalit communities, often drawing upon the framework of the collective unconscious to articulate historical experiences of oppression. Through autobiographies, novels, and short stories, Dalit writers narrate the lived realities of individuals who were relegated to the peripheries of village life under the varnashrama system. Similarly, Dalit poetry conveys the emotional and physical suffering of the oppressed through evocative imagery and symbolic representations.

These narratives are not merely individual recollections but are reflective of a shared consciousness shaped by systemic marginalization. Stories of caste-based discrimination are transmitted across generations, evolving with age and context while retaining their core message of resistance and identity. The experience of being Dalit itself fosters a deep sense of empathy and identification with the victims portrayed in these literary works. Mythological figures such as *Shambuka, Karna, and Eklavya* are often reinterpreted in Dalit literature as emblematic of historical injustice, aligning their suffering with that of contemporary Dalit communities.

Dalit literature thus encapsulates the enduring pain experienced by Dalits throughout history, framed within a binary structure of oppressor versus oppressed, or superior versus inferior. In particular, Dalit poetry connects past and present struggles by channeling the collective unconscious of the Dalit writer, enabling a creative and symbolic reimagining of social realities. Characters from both dominant and marginalized groups frequently appear in these texts and can be critically analyzed through the lens of archetypal theory. This approach reveals the mechanisms of caste-based subjugation and highlights the persistent nature of Dalit suffering across different historical periods. In this literary framework, oppressors are typically cast in a negative light, while the oppressed are afforded empathy and moral legitimacy.

Archetype and Dalit Experiences

In literary studies, narratives often revolve around past events and the characters associated with them. These characters, although situated in different historical or cultural contexts, frequently exhibit recurring patterns in their behavior and symbolic roles. Across time, numerous images and symbols appear consistently in literary works, retaining similar meanings and signifying key cultural, emotional, or historical themes of their respective eras.

The concept of archetype provides a critical framework for analyzing such recurrences in literature. Particularly in modern literary analysis, archetypal criticism offers valuable insight into narrative structure, character development, and symbolic imagery. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines archetype as "a symbol, theme, setting, or character-type that recurs in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, and rituals so frequently or prominently as to suggest that it embodies some essential element of 'universal' human experience" (Baldick, 2001:19).

A notable example of archetypal representation can be found in S. T. Coleridge's *'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.'* The ancient mariner symbolizes a class of seafarers from ancient times who have undergone profound and transformative experiences, which he is compelled to recount to a modern figure, the wedding guest. The guest becomes entranced by the mariner's narrative, symbolizing the timeless relevance and power of such stories. Similarly, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land'* introduces the mythological figure Tiresias as an archetypal character, drawing from various religious and cultural sources, such as the Holy Grail, the Sermon on the Mount, the Buddha's Fire Sermon, and the prophecies of Prajapati. These interwoven elements reflect Eliot's use of mythic symbols and images to represent cultural decay and spiritual emptiness in the modern world.

Archetypal criticism finds its roots in James Frazer's *'The Golden Bough'* and the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung. Frazer explores the human-nature relationship through ancient rituals such as magic and sorcery, which early societies employed to influence natural forces for purposes like agricultural success and protection against disease. Jung advanced the concept by linking archetypes to the human psyche, describing them as "ways of thinking and acting that derive from the most primitive aspect of our psyche," which he identifies as "the psyche we have in common with our most distant ancestors" (Bukhanan, 2010: 25). Jung further asserted that "certain symbols in dreams and myths were residues of ancestral memory preserved in the Collective Unconscious" (Baldick, 2001: 19). He defined the collective unconscious as "the inherited dimension of the psych[e]… consisting of the entirety of human history and manifesting itself in the form of a system of archetypes" (Bukhanan, 2010: 91).

In this context, memory particularly collective memory plays a crucial role in poetry and literature, often forming the

basis of myth. Archetypes, when studied alongside collective memory, help trace the enduring psychological and cultural motifs that shape a community's identity over generations. These enduring patterns not only structure myth but also serve as a reflection of shared historical consciousness.

In Dalit literature, particularly poetry, recurring images of oppression, the oppressor, and the oppressed are central motifs, expressed through a wide range of symbols, metaphors, and both human and allegorical forms. While each generation of Dalit poets experiments with and evolves poetic form and expression, what remains consistent is the deep-rooted memory of marginalization, expressed through recurring symbols and experiential imagery. First-generation Dalit poets such as Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Namdeo Dhasal, Yashwant Manohar, Waman Nimbalkar, and Jyoti Lanjewar established a foundational voice of protest and resistance rooted in their lived experiences. Subsequent generations including poets like Loknath Yashwant, Omprakash Valmiki, Mahendra Bhaware, Machchindra Chormare, Mahendra Gaikwad, and B. Rangarao, etc. carry forward this tradition, unified by a shared collective memory of caste-based oppression. Despite being raised in different regions and socio-cultural contexts, these poets are bound by a common experience of systemic marginalization. Regional differences inform the specific images and metaphors employed in their poetry, yet the core symbolic language often resonates across generations.

This shared poetic consciousness can be likened to W. B. Yeats's concept of the spiritus mundi a collective reservoir of symbols and imagery that poets draw upon to express universal experiences. In this regard, Northrop Frye aptly observes that "every poet has his private mythology, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols of much of which he is quite unconscious" (Frye, 2025). Applied to Dalit literature,

this insight reveals two significant trends. First, Dalit poets often employ common archetypal images of oppression rooted in historical and communal memory. Second, their poetry also reflects the diversity of oppression as experienced by different subgroups within the broader Dalit and marginalized communities.

Inherent Archetype: The Broken man

Loknath Yashwant stands out as a prolific and distinctive voice in contemporary literature, known for crafting a unique style rich in sharp sarcasm. His poetry brims with vivid imagery and potent symbolism, portraying the harrowing realities of marginalized individuals laborers, slum dwellers, peasants, beggars, both men and women. Through powerful similes and metaphors, Loknath conveys a deep, simmering rage one that erupts through his biting use of satire and irony. His work brings into focus the "broken men," a term representing those historically oppressed and dehumanized due to their caste identity, particularly those belonging to the former untouchable class. These individuals endure repeated marginalization across generations victims not only of traditional forms of caste-based oppression but also of newer, more insidious forces brought on by globalization and the emergence of a "sophisticated white-collar class among the Dalits." Loknath's poetry traces this trajectory of oppression, highlighting how the forms and agents of marginalization have evolved over time. Yet, the core of his work remains centered on revealing "the tragic world of broken men who suffer in each age through their inherent caste attached to them with their birth."

The concept of *"Broken Men"* has its theoretical roots in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's seminal work Who Were the Shudras? Ambedkar links the emergence of these communities to tribal conflicts in early human history. During the nomadic phase, settled tribes were frequently attacked and displaced by

wandering groups. Those who fled and took refuge in forests or lived on the margins of villages were initially seen as vulnerable. However, the new village settlers soon recognized their strategic value and used them as a protective buffer against further attacks. Over time, this displaced group already living at the periphery came under the spiritual influence of Buddha. Yet, due to shifting socio-political forces, they were eventually branded as untouchables.

As Ambedkar notes, these communities were never part of the traditional four-fold Varna system outlined in Hindu scriptures. Instead, they were labeled with terms such as Antya, Antyaja, or Antyavasin, denoting their position at the very edge of the social order. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar provides a historical and socio-political framework for understanding the origins of untouchability through the concept of Antya. He explains, "It is a name given to those people who lived on the outskirts of the village. The word Antya has, therefore, a survival value. It tells us that there was a time when some people lived inside the village and some lived outside the village and that those who lived outside the village, i.e. on the Antya of the village, were called Antyaja" (Moon, 1990: 279). This spatial separation reflects the social exclusion that later manifested as untouchability.

In addressing the roots of untouchability imposed on the Broken Men, Dr. Ambedkar points to religious conflict as a key factor. He notes that these communities' conversion to Buddhism sparked insecurity and hostility among Brahmins. *"The Broken Men* hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism. On this reasoning it is possible to conclude that one of the roots of untouchability lies in the hatred and contempt which the Brahmins created against those who were Buddhist" (Moon, 1990: 317). Ambedkar also draws attention

to the stark economic disparities between the settled communities and those living on the margins. He writes, "The Settled Community was a wealthy community with agriculture and cattle as means of livelihood. The Broken Men were a community of paupers with no means of livelihood and entirely dependent upon the Settled Community" (Moon, 1990: 354). This economic dependency further entrenched their subordinate status.

Additionally, Ambedkar links the practice of untouchability to dietary habits shaped by poverty. Despite being Buddhists, *the Broken Men* consumed beef out of necessity a practice that became a marker of impurity under Brahmanical norms. Drawing from Dr. B.R. Bhandarkar's research, which notes that cow killing was declared a capital offense during the Gupta period in the 4th century CE, Ambedkar situates the institutionalization of untouchability within a broader religious conflict. He states: "We can, therefore, say with some confidence that Untouchability was born some time about 400 A.D. It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism" (Moon, 1990: 379). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's historical account paints a stark and painful portrait of the Broken Men, portraying them as a community systematically excluded from economic activities and relegated to roles of servitude and hard labor. They were forced to survive on the flesh of dead cattle, a symbol of their extreme deprivation and social ostracism. As Ambedkar's narrative suggests, the Broken Man serves as an archetype representing those trapped in a tragic world shaped by Brahmanical oppression.

The origins of this marginalization, according to Ambedkar, date back to prehistoric tribal conflicts between settled and migratory communities. He describes how the nomadic tribes attacked and displaced the settled ones, leaving many to live on the fringes of villages, where they were later

exploited as a subordinate labor force. Scholars such as Romila Thapar and D.D. Kosambi support this view, noting that marginalized groups existed during the Buddha era, but the rigid caste system and forms of discrimination familiar today had not yet taken root. These communities could still move relatively freely, were assigned certain occupations, and participated in village life. Importantly, these marginalized groups stood in opposition to the Vedic orthodoxy and gravitated toward Buddhism. While there existed a general social notion of "high" and "low" status, this did not prevent individuals from joining the Buddha Sangha or becoming enlightened teachers and sages. Though Vedic priests, the symbolic oppressors, existed, their influence was limited during this time.

Following the counter-revolution in Indian history and up until the Muslim invasions, many of these Broken Men gradually lost their connection to Buddhism. In the absence of its liberating framework, they began to internalize their marginality, interpreting it as the karmic result of past lives a view reinforced by scriptural narratives imposed by the upper castes. Over time, this psychological submission deepened. During *the Peshwa Era*, their status further deteriorated, as symbolized by the degrading practice of forcing them to carry a broom to erase their footprints and a pot to collect their spit. Caste thus confined these individuals within a rigid and dehumanizing structure, where the oppressor often a Brahmin was venerated almost as a divine master. The oppressors' control was absolute, and their dominance spanned both material and psychological realms.

In the modern era, following relentless social reform movements led by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and other revolutionaries, Dalits eventually secured fundamental rights and recognition as equal citizens. The Constitution of modern India, drafted under the

visionary leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, formally abolished untouchability and laid the foundation for a legal framework based on equality and justice. However, despite this constitutional mandate, caste continues to persist deeply in the collective psyche of Indian society affecting both the so-called upper and lower castes. Upper caste individuals often identify and treat members of marginalized communities through subtle yet enduring markers of caste identity, thereby sustaining systemic patterns of subordination.

Even when Dalits attain higher education and secure Class I positions in government and private sectors, they frequently encounter sophisticated forms of caste-based discrimination. These forms of prejudice referred to as *"high-tech discrimination"* obstruct their advancement into leadership roles and undermine their professional growth. Moreover, a significant portion of the Dalit population continues to live in conditions of extreme poverty, particularly in rural India, where caste-based hierarchies remain rigid. In these regions, Dalits are often subjected to demeaning and hazardous forms of labor such as manual scavenging and the disposal of dead cattle practices that not only violate their dignity but also reinforce their historical exclusion from mainstream socio-economic life. However, as the text argues, oppression has not vanished it has merely evolved. While earlier methods were overt and physical, today's are high-tech and more insidious. Yet, the psychological dynamics between the oppressed and the oppressor remain unchanged. Both continue to carry their archetypes through the centuries, and it is precisely this enduring psyche that Loknath Yashwant exposes in his poetry.

The World of Loknath's 'The Broken Man: In the Search of Homeland'

As previously discussed, Loknath Yashwant's poetry collection Broken Man reveals two binary opposites of prominent social archetypes that emerge in the context of post-

independence India. The poetry suggests that the promise of religious and social liberation through conversion remains incomplete, as systemic forces still seek to undermine this transformation. The presence of these symbolic elements underscores the fragile nature of identity and belonging for Dalits, highlighting the persistent anxieties around displacement, both physical and ideological, from the emancipatory path envisioned by Ambedkar.

The first is the figure of *the oppressed* the Dalit individuals who continue to face systemic discrimination and social exclusion despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Their suffering is rendered through stark, poignant imagery that reflects their lived realities in contemporary Indian society.

The second archetype is *the oppressor*, who appears in new forms and adopts more sophisticated, often concealed methods of subjugation. Unlike the traditional oppressor rooted in overt casteism, the modern oppressor may function through institutional structures, social codes, and "high-tech" forms of exclusion that are subtler but equally damaging.

In addition to these *binary opposites* of distinct social archetypes oppressor and oppressed; Loknath Yashwant's poetry also contemplates specific objects and symbols that carry deep cultural and emotional resonance for the Ambedkarite community. These images are not merely decorative; they serve as powerful metaphors that evoke a shared historical memory and collective struggle. Through these symbols, Loknath reveals an underlying conspiracy one in which Dalits, even after converting to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1956, continue to face existential threats.

Modern Archetype of Broken man 'the Oppressed'

In Loknath Yashwant's '*Broken Man'*, the traditional image of the broken man rooted in historical caste-based oppression

undergoes a transformation to reflect the complexities of modernity. The modern broken man is not merely a victim of overt social exclusion but becomes a figure entangled in the contradictions of contemporary Indian society. Despite legal safeguards and social reforms, he remains trapped within invisible structures of discrimination, struggling with both historical stigma and modern expectations.

This archetype represents an individual who, though perhaps economically mobile or professionally positioned, carries the psychological scars of caste marginalization. He may hold a government post, wear formal attire, and live in an urban setting, yet he remains socially alienated and institutionally vulnerable. His achievements are often overshadowed by latent casteist attitudes that question his merit or legitimacy. In professional spaces, he may face subtle exclusion, tokenism, or high-tech forms of discrimination, while in personal spaces, he may suppress his identity to avoid social backlash.

The modern broken man thus symbolizes a dual burden: the historical weight of caste and the emotional toll of navigating a superficially inclusive but structurally biased society. In Loknath's poetry, this archetype embodies resilience in the face of evolving yet persistent forms of oppression, marking the continuity of caste in postcolonial India under the guise of meritocracy and modernity.

In his poem *"Assadulla Khan Alias Mirza Ghalib,"* Loknath Yashwant poses a provocative question to the iconic Mughal-era poet Mirza Ghalib: Why did he never give voice to the suffering of the laborers who toiled to build architectural marvels like *the Taj Mahal*? Yashwant critiques the poetic tradition for its selective memory, pointing out that while grand monuments are immortalized in verse, the anonymous hands that constructed them remain absent from both history and literature.

The hands that built the Taj
Are bleeding
I see them in my dreams
Crying
Ghalib, is there a ghazal of yours
On the subject of
Social equality? (Yashwant, 2018: 17)

Through this interrogation, Loknath constructs the archetype of the labourer particularly the Dalit worker as a symbol of forgotten sacrifice. These are the individuals who have physically built India's cities, monuments, and skyscrapers, yet their lives remain invisible in mainstream narratives. The poet highlights a painful irony: a Dalit mason who constructs a house may not be allowed to enter it once it is occupied, especially if the new homeowner is of an upper caste. Despite contributing foundational labor, he is still barred from the social and symbolic spaces his hands have helped create, solely due to his caste identity.

Yashwant's critique extends beyond Ghalib to a broader literary and cultural tradition that has consistently excluded working-class and marginalized voices. By foregrounding the lived realities of these laborers, Yashwant challenges dominant aesthetics and calls for a rethinking of whose stories are worthy of poetic and historical remembrance.

In *"The Complaint,"* Loknath Yashwant portrays the generational suffering of a Dalit man whose home is repeatedly destroyed by oppressive forces. Highlighting the plight of slum dwellers Dalits who flee caste violence only to face eviction in cities Loknath draws a parallel to Ambedkar's concept of the broken man, historically displaced and still pushed to society's margins. The poem critiques the ongoing exclusion of Dalits under modern governance, showing how their lives remain unstable, and their presence tolerated only at the edges

Again and again
They destroyed our huts
Huts with mud walls
And we built them
Again and again (Yashwant, 2018: 25)

Loknath Yashwant's poem *"And One More Zero"* is rich in symbolism and vivid imagery, opening with the striking scene of a laborer fixing an advertisement hoarding for an industrialist. The industrialist here symbolizes the forces of privatization and globalization entities that, while promising progress, systematically rob marginalized communities of employment opportunities once safeguarded by the public sector. The poem implicitly critiques the erosion of reservation policies for Dalits due to the rise of corporate dominance. The laborer, unaware of the broader implications, unknowingly contributes to his own marginalization by promoting these forces. In a powerful parallel, Loknath invokes the crucifixion of Jesus nailed by the very people he sought to save; likening the laborer's act to that of innocent hands carrying out systemic injustice.

When I see a labourer nailing
The hoarding of a product advertisement
Of an industrialist
It reminds me of, Jesus Christ. (Yashwant, 2018: 31)

Kabir, a prominent medieval saint-poet, became a beacon for marginalized communities through his inclusive and humanistic philosophy. His Dohas inspired a sect largely comprising Dalits, who resonated deeply with his rejection of caste hierarchy and spiritual elitism. In Loknath Yashwant's poem *"Kabir,"* the poet engages in a reflective dialogue with *Kabir,* sharing his own lived experiences of suffering. One haunting simile compares the plight of Dalits to the victims of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, evoking the suffocating conditions that persist across generations. The poem powerfully illustrates

how historical injustices continue to poison the present, leaving Dalits trapped in cycles of pain and exclusion.

> Kabir
> We suffered like those in the Bhopal tragedy
> Unable to even run helter-skelter
> Due to the leaked poison gas
> Unable to see, unable to shut our eyelashes
> The moment you try to breath in
> Death holds you in a tight clasp (Yashwant, 2018: 34)

In the poem *"The Economics of Social Planning,"* Loknath Yashwant presents a scathing critique of caste and gender-based exploitation through the figure of the Dalit woman. The poem exposes how, for generations, Dalit women have been objectified and violated, their modesty stripped away by upper-caste men under the protective guise of caste privilege. In stark contrast, upper-caste women are revered and respected, even by those from oppressed communities.

> The wife of a poor man
> Is the wife of whole town
> An object that can be played with
> But
> The wife of a rich man
> Becomes the sister of the whole town
> Such is the mentality
> Deep down in the subconscious
> Such is the Economics of Social Planning.
> (Yashwant, 2018: 41)

Through sharp sarcasm in the poem, Loknath unveils the archetype of the Dalit woman; vulnerable, marginalized, and historically subjected to systemic sexual violence. He interrogates the four-fold Varna system and its economic logic, which has long perpetuated an environment of insecurity and dehumanization for Dalit women.

A recurring theme in Dalit poetry is the use of motherly and fatherly archetypes to honor the generational sacrifices made in the struggle for dignity and survival. These parental figures often symbolize resilience; those who, despite immense hardship, chose transformative paths such as embracing Buddhism or aligning with the emancipatory visions of Mahatma Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to secure a better future for their children. Loknath Yashwant continues this tradition in his poem *"About the Dreams of Mother,"* where he presents the Mother Archetype as a guiding force.

> The woman who gave birth to me
> Might have some dreams for me
> What about those dreams? (Yashwant, 2018: 49)

The poem "About the Dreams of Mother," unfolds as a dialogue between the poet and a person preoccupied with religious rhetoric; someone who clings to tradition despite personal suffering. In contrast, the poet draws strength from his mother's vision, who instilled in him not passive faith but an active dream: the dream of liberation from centuries of caste-based marginalization. Through this figure, Loknath elevates the Dalit mother as a symbol of clarity, resistance, and hope; one who charts the path of social awakening through lived wisdom rather than inherited dogma.

"The Palanquin Bearers" presents a poignant image of the Bhoi community, a Dalit group historically relegated to the labor of carrying palanquins. The poem underscores a persistent social equation that has remained unchanged over time: while the upper castes and ruling classes have advanced and benefited from progress, the so-called "inferior" classes have been left behind, locked into the same roles. Though the patrons have shifted from royal rulers in the past to wealthy casteist individuals in the present the exploitation remains constant. The archetype of the Bhoi man, as depicted in the poem, reflects a stagnant socio-economic condition; his

behavior and position in society appear unaltered despite changing times, reinforcing the enduring nature of caste-based inequality.

> Kings sit in a Palanquin
> So do godmen, saints, and their ilk
> But the Bhois
> The palanquin bearers have been the same
> Since the beginning of time. (Yashwant, 2018: 59)

Archetype of Historic Oppressors:

The oppressor in each age appears in varied forms: temple priests, religious guardians, landowners, businessmen, political rulers, and grassroots followers all bound by the ideological framework of varnashrama dharma. Despite their different roles, their collective aim remains consistent: to keep Dalits excluded from the social mainstream. The tools of this exclusion have been persistent and brutal violence, systemic atrocities, forced displacement, and the destruction of Dalit property, leaving individuals in states of deprivation from which recovery is nearly impossible. The varnashrama system provides a structural blueprint for caste-based domination, clearly defining social hierarchies and enforcing them through ritual, belief, and violence. The oppressor's psyche is not a historical anomaly but a recurring construct reborn in each generation, legitimized by scriptural authority, and sustained by a continuous transmission of caste hatred. This cyclical regeneration ensures that caste-based oppression remains deeply embedded in the social fabric, adapting to new contexts while retaining its core purpose: to deny Dalits dignity, space, and autonomy.

Loknath's poetry reveals that the structure and mechanics of varnashrama continue to operate in modern forms, assigning Dalits a fixed place in the social hierarchy. The oppressor's psyche, shaped and sustained by scriptural authority, is reborn in each era, passing caste-based hatred

from one generation to the next. In the post-independence era, Yashwant locates these same oppressors within new, high-tech frameworks of control, particularly under globalization and privatization. His collection '*the Broken Man'* lays bare these updated methods of exclusion; subtle, systemic, and deeply entrenched; highlighting how caste continues to mutate rather than disappear.

The poem *"Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar: alias Babasaheb"* is a dramatic monologue delivered from the perspective of Dr. Ambedkar's statue; a symbol of revolutionary change whose global influence and recognition continue to grow rapidly. Dr. Ambedkar stands as an enduring emblem of protest and resistance; his legacy is upheld by marchers and peace-seekers alike. The Constitution he helped frame is widely regarded as one of the most progressive in the world, particularly for its enduring role in protecting the rights of Dalits. Over time, numerous policies inspired by his vision have enabled the Dalit community to achieve a level of social and political competitiveness with upper-caste groups. Dr. Ambedkar's intellectual and reformist influence has significantly contributed to dispelling superstition and irrational beliefs among marginalized communities. From rural areas to urban centers, Dalits have become increasingly active in political and social spheres, a development that has provoked resentment among certain upper-caste groups. This tension has led to the targeted vandalism of Ambedkar's statues, a phenomenon now common across many regions.

In the poem, the poet presents a scene of communal conflict that escalates into violence. During this confrontation, an upper-caste individual defaces the statue, deliberately breaking off its index finger. This gesture carries deep symbolic weight. Most statues of Dr. Ambedkar depict him pointing toward the Parliament, signifying his call for marginalized communities to seek justice and empowerment through

legislative processes. The removal of the index finger thus becomes a metaphor for the upper caste's resistance to Dalit political ascent an attempt to deny them access to the very institutions meant to ensure their rights and representation. Numerous forces continue to oppose the ideals of social reformers, often resorting to direct and aggressive means. Historically, Buddhism, once a prominent force in central India, was systematically marginalized due to its challenge to the established socio-religious hierarchy. Revolutionary figures who sought to dismantle caste-based oppression have frequently encountered fierce resistance from entrenched casteist forces. These opposing actors often embody a regressive archetype; one that seeks to erase egalitarian and welfare-oriented philosophies in order to reassert dominance and reduce Dalits to a state of subjugation.

> One among the violent mass
> Forward he came
> Real slow and calm
> And
> Without much effort he plucked
> My Beckoning finger pointed index
> That showed the way. (Yashwant, 2018: 24)

The poem *"History"* serves as a meditation on the kind of legacy that should be passed down to future generations. The poet's reflections are tinged with sorrow, as his thoughts are deeply occupied with the global history of violence against innocent lives. He invokes powerful and disturbing imagery: battles, gas chambers, nuclear devastation, the Gujarat massacre and ultimately turns to a poignant scene from the Peshwa era, where Dalits were subjected to extreme humiliation by being forced to tie brooms to their waists. This historical practice in the Pune region of Maharashtra exemplifies a particularly brutal form of caste-based oppression, arguably more dehumanizing than many systems

of slavery. The archetype of the oppressor, as presented in the poem, becomes a universal symbol, representing all manifestations of violent and systemic discrimination.

> What ideals do I show children?
> ---
> The degradation of humanity?
> Tying a broom to the waist
> Of human beings
> In the Brahmanc rule
> Of Peshwa rulers? (Yashwant, 2018: 48)

Loknath's *"Directions",* though brief at just five lines, powerfully constructs the archetype of binary opposites inherent in the caste system. The poem exposes the underlying philosophy of the oppressor one that seeks to elevate itself by systematically subjugating Dalits. Historically, this domination was enforced through overt violence; in contemporary times, it manifests in more covert, technologically advanced, and institutionalized forms that marginalize progressive Dalits. Although democratic frameworks have ostensibly integrated all communities, the poem highlights a harsh reality: despite the absence of overt oppression, Dalits continue to be subtly pushed to the margins.

> Friends
> The direction you move in
> Is different from ours
> You will stand up
> Only after we collapse (Yashwant, 2018: 56)

Loknath's poem *"Escapists"* offers a compelling portrayal of the oppressor's archetype as an escapist one who ultimately flees accountability. The poem suggests that many such individuals, involved in organized crimes against Dalits, evade justice by fleeing to foreign countries. The narrator, an awakened Dalit voice, speaks from within a democratic framework that has empowered him with the awareness and

tools to expose such systemic crimes. He reveals that the violence inflicted upon Dalit communities including the burning of their localities is often not driven by hatred alone, but strategically carried out for financial gain by their adversaries. The narrator confronts this brutal reality with sharp moral inquiry, questioning how such inhumane acts can be justified merely for profit. He further challenges the legitimacy of caste-based violence by asking who granted these oppressors the so-called *"certificates of superiority"* that embolden them to commit atrocities against Dalits.

> To secure warmth
> You immolated Dalits
> To obtained some ghee
> Bastis were burnt to ashes
> How could you do this?
> You left them run-down and deprived
> (Yashwant, 2018: 83)

Through the archetype of the oppressor, Loknath Yashwant exposes the underlying psychology of casteist individuals, who reappear in every era under different guises and forms. Despite their changing outward appearances, their core objective remains consistent: to sustain the religious and social machinery that perpetuates caste hierarchy. A key element of their strategy is to systematically marginalize Dalits and obstruct their access to progress and equality. Loknath's archetype not only reveals their mindset but also highlights the enduring structure of oppression that persists, even within modern democratic contexts.

Symbolic Archetype:

Every sign and symbol carries specific cultural meanings, which are often reflected in poetry. From structuralism to deconstructionist perspectives, the interpretation of symbols in literature has been extensively explored. Prominent poets of

the Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist periods employed a wide range of symbols to convey complex layers of meaning tied to their philosophical, emotional, or aesthetic concerns. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, a symbol is defined as "anything that stands for or represents something else beyond it usually an idea conventionally associated with it." (Baldick, 2001: 251)

In the context of Dalit literature, however, symbols are frequently reinterpreted to uncover meanings related to social justice and resistance rather than adhering to their traditional or aesthetic connotations. Dalit writers challenge established interpretations, seeking instead to expose underlying power dynamics and systemic injustices. This critical approach extends to the treatment of myths and heroes as well. Figures traditionally celebrated in mainstream literature often appear in Dalit narratives as antagonists or symbols of oppression. Similarly, the symbolic value of certain objects in Dalit literature is reshaped according to their alignment with equality and justice. In this vein, Loknath's poetry actively subverts conventional symbolic meanings, reassigning them to reflect the lived realities and struggles of marginalized communities. His work exemplifies how symbols in Dalit literature become tools for ideological critique and cultural redefinition.

Mirza Ghalib, a prominent poet of the Mughal era and a master of the ghazal form, is celebrated for his exploration of themes such as love, philosophical inquiry, beauty, mysticism, and Sufism. The poem "Assadulla Khan Alias Mirza Ghalib" is framed as a dramatic monologue in which Ghalib assumes the role of a passive listener. The central tension of the poem arises from a comparison between the poet-narrator, a Dalit voice, and the revered figure of Ghalib. In a reflective moment, the narrator speaks to his beloved about Ghalib, but she expresses interest only in the life of the legendary poet,

dismissing the narrator's own reflections on the social discrimination faced by his community.

A key symbol in the poem is the Taj Mahal often hailed as the world's greatest monument to love, constructed by Shah Jahan in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal. The narrator is struck by the irony that, while the *Taj Mahal* is globally celebrated, countless monuments, palaces, and feats of infrastructure built by marginalized laborers particularly Dalits have never received similar recognition. He challenges the very foundation of the *Taj Mahal's* fame, pointing out that it was created by the toil of unsung, oppressed workers whose contributions remain unacknowledged.

In this context, the Taj Mahal becomes an archetype of historical injustice: a monument admired for its beauty and romantic symbolism, yet detached from the stories of the very people who built it. The poem critiques how narratives of love and grandeur often overshadow the real struggles and sacrifices of the working class. Thus, the archetypal image of the *Taj Mahal* stands as a metaphor for how history and culture frequently celebrate the elite while erasing the contributions of those relegated to the margins.

> The other day
> On visiting Taj Mahal
> I remembered you again and again
> Was there an inn or a tavern there?
> …
> In memory of our beloved
> We also built many palaces
> Palaces unequaled, Ghalib
> Never did they become
> Wonders of the world
> Isn't that strange? (Yashwant, 2018: 16-17)

In the poem *"Vipassana: There is nothing to be ashamed of!"*, Loknath introduces three potent symbolic elements—vultures,

a dried-up pipal tree, and dice to expose the ongoing conspiracies of casteist forces aimed at reasserting control over the Dalit community. Through these symbols, the poet constructs a layered critique of social and political oppression. The image of vultures perched on a lifeless pipal tree powerfully evokes the nature of casteist individuals, depicted as predators lying in wait to exploit moments of vulnerability. Just as vultures prey upon the weak or dying in the wild, these oppressors are portrayed as watching with jealousy and anticipation for opportunities to undermine Dalit progress.

'The dried-up pipal tree' is indicative of Bodhi Tree of Buddha, which is here in a new situation symbolizes the diminishing influence of Buddhism among Ambedkarite Dalits; a tradition revived with purpose by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1956. Loknath's vision mourns this spiritual disconnect, suggesting that as the tree withers, so too does the ideological foundation that once empowered the community.

The final symbol *'the dice'* represents calculated manipulation and deceit. It signifies the structural and institutional strategies, such as globalization and privatization that have systematically eroded Dalit access to public sector employment, particularly where constitutional provisions like reservation do not apply. This metaphor recalls historical betrayals, such as the game of dice in the Mahabharata, and highlights how power is being silently wrested away. Loknath warns that, without intervention, future generations of Dalits may be pushed back into cycles of poverty and exclusion, echoing the conditions their ancestors endured.

> Watching the so called progressive society
> Of Babsaheb
> Are awaiting atop dried up pipal tree
> To bite and gnaw
> Globalization, privatization
> End of reservation

The dice are already cast
In the deceptive and bogus garb of merit
(Yashwant, 2018: 14)

The poem *"Something About Us"* opens with the symbolic archetype of 'Mother Nature.' Traditionally, in mainstream literature, Mother Nature represents nurturing, fertility, and the impartial abundance of the Earth providing sustenance to all living beings without discrimination. However, the poet subverts this conventional image by expressing a deep sense of exclusion and injustice. He laments the hardships faced by his community, whose birth into a so-called inferior caste has denied them access to even the basic blessings symbolized by Mother Nature.

Rather than experiencing nature's nurturing embrace, the poet finds himself in a world where those blessings appear withheld-restricted by the entrenched structures of caste, religion, and hereditary privilege. Through this reimagining, the poet critiques how natural abundance and universal nurture have been ideologically and socially manipulated to serve dominant castes. The archetype of Mother Nature, thus, becomes a site of contested meaning where what is supposed to be universally accessible is shown to be selectively granted.

We didn't receive any of Mother Nature's gifts
Ever since our birth
This was willed by
Our religion, caste and genealogy
We're unhappy… any trifle vexes us of late.
(Yashwant, 2018: 19)

Loknath Yashwant's poem *"Nafisa"* unfolds as a poignant monologue, addressed to a woman named Nafisa who listens silently as the poet reflects on her plight. Nafisa is preparing to leave the "city of temples," a space symbolically associated with religious orthodoxy, from which she is being subtly or forcibly displaced due to her religious identity. The poem highlights the

vulnerability of a woman who is not only young and physically objectified described as having a "curvaceous body" but also marked by her minority status in a deeply polarized society.

The poet, familiar with *Nafisa* for a long time, expresses both sympathy and concern. His words serve as a series of warnings and suggestions, advising her to be cautious as she searches for a safer place to live. While encouraging her to walk until she hears the call of the Mullah, he also warns her of unfamiliar people and landscapes that may not be welcoming.

In a moment of compassionate guidance, the poet urges Nafisa that, if wearied by her journey, she should rest beneath the Bodhi tree a profound symbol of peace and spiritual refuge in Buddhism, where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment, or Nibbana. This metaphor signals a space of acceptance, safety, and liberation from suffering. In evoking the Bodhi tree, Loknath gestures toward an alternative moral and spiritual vision rooted in compassion, contrasting with the exclusion she faces in the dominant religious and cultural order.

> And tired if you are
> Do not hesitate to rest
> Under the Bodhi tree (Yashwant, 2018: 23)

In the poem *"India,"* Loknath Yashwant employs striking analogy to critique a society entrenched in superstition and blind faith. He targets the unquestioning acceptance of traditional fortune-telling practices, which reflect a broader cultural tendency to embrace irrational religious beliefs without scrutiny. Through this lens, the poet highlights how such beliefs are manipulated to reinforce religious dominance and social control. Central to the poem is the image of a caged parrot, trained by a soothsayer to select fortune cards. The parrot's act in choosing a card that seemingly aligns with a person's life astonishes the onlookers, who marvel at the

perceived accuracy. Yet, as Loknath subtly reveals, no one questions the bird's own captivity. This metaphor draws attention to the deeper irony: those who claim to reveal truth are themselves imprisoned by the systems they serve. The parrot becomes a symbol of the archetypal crooked devotee a manipulative figure who, under the guise of religiosity, exploits public naivety for personal gain.

> A parrot that sits in a cage
> Reveals the fortune of a man
> (Yashwant, 2018: 39)

Loknath Yashwant's poem *"India,"* though brief, just four lines delivers a sharp critique of the country's deep-rooted superstitions. In the closing couplet, Loknath employs biting sarcasm, suggesting that if people can place their faith in a caged bird, the story of irrationality and manipulation in India effectively writes itself. The poem becomes a powerful satire on the cultural readiness to accept superstition over reason. Loknath's poem thus critiques not only superstition but the ethical decay masked by popular religiosity in contemporary India.

In his poem *"The Sand Sunken Ship,"* Loknath Yashwant employs a powerful maritime metaphor to symbolize the state of *the Republican Party of India (RPI)*, the political successor to the Scheduled Caste Federation; both originally conceptualized by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The image of a ship stuck in sand, immobilized in shallow waters unseen by the captain, reflects a phase of stagnation and disorientation. While in nautical terms this could be a temporary condition requiring coordinated effort to restore movement, Loknath uses the metaphor to critique the RPI's long-standing dysfunction following Dr. Ambedkar's demise.

The party, once a vessel of Dalit political assertion, has fractured into numerous factions, losing its ideological

coherence and public influence. Though it still holds emotional significance for many, efforts to reunify the splintered groups, especially around election seasons have repeatedly failed. Loknath attributes this failure to the lack of mutual trust among party leaders, despite the persistence of intellectuals and grassroots workers.

> A sand sunken ship
> Its sail in tatters
> In what I find most distinguished
> (Yashwant, 2018: 66)

He further deepens the metaphor through the image of a *"sail in tatters,"* suggesting that the very fabric of the party is torn beyond repair. The poet's disillusionment becomes clear when even his young son, upon hearing calls for party unification, mockingly raises his shoes; signaling ridicule and hopelessness. For Loknath, the ship is no longer merely stuck; it has entered a state of beyond revival or redemption.

In various ancient cultures, the goat has held rich symbolic meaning. In Greek and Roman traditions, it was associated with fertility, abundance, and strength, and closely linked to the god Pan: a half-human, half-goat deity. In Hindu mythology, the goat serves as the vehicle of Goddess Kali, while in Islam, it plays a central role in the ritual of Qurbani during Eid al-Adha. Despite these spiritual associations, goats are widely sacrificed and consumed across cultures. Known for their meekness and inability to resist slaughter, goats are often viewed as passive beings.

In Loknath Yashwant's poem *"Monologue of a Goat,"* the goat becomes a powerful metaphor for the Dalit condition helpless, voiceless, and persistently subjected to systemic violence across ages. The poem reflects the historical and ongoing injustice endured by Dalits, who, despite resisting oppression since the time of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's mass

renunciation of Hinduism in 1956, continue to be identified as Hindus in official records. Loknath critiques this symbolic violence, where Dalits are forcibly counted within a religion that has long excluded and oppressed them. Through the goat's monologue, he exposes the subtle mechanisms of an expansionist religious order that insists on claiming Dalits as part of the Hindu fold without recognizing their rights, dignity, or equal status. The poem becomes a plea for recognition and autonomy, underscoring the contradiction of being labeled as part of a faith that continues to deny justice.

I do not have hands
To resist
I cannot even bark
But does that mean
You write 786 on my back
Before butchering me.
(Yashwant, 2018: 85)

Lokanath Yashwant's poetry is marked by a rich tapestry of symbolic archetype that illuminate the continued plight of Dalits, especially in the context of religious and socio-political threats seeking to reimpose caste hierarchies. His symbolic language captures both historical injustices and contemporary anxieties. For instance, *the Taj Mahal*, traditionally a symbol of grandeur and beauty, is reinterpreted as a monument built on the suffering of nameless laborers, thus linking cultural pride with caste exploitation. Similarly, the vulture and dice emerge as metaphors for the manipulative forces conspiring against Dalits, reflecting both violence and strategic exclusion.

The dried up *Bodhi tree* is particularly evocative, expressing fear of a renewed decline of Buddhism the faith that once offered spiritual refuge and socio-political identity to millions of Dalits under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership. While the Bodhi tree represents inclusivity and peace, its dryness symbolizes cultural erosion and fading hope. In contrast, the caged parrot

in his poem critiques the prevalence of superstition and blind belief in India, where traditional soothsayers mislead the public under the guise of religion, reinforcing irrational authority. Loknath's t's personal embrace of Buddhism, mentioned across several poems, serves as a testament to his search for peace, dignity, and philosophical clarity. His emotional reflection on the fractured *Republican Party of India (RPI)*, symbolized by the sand-sunken ship, underscores his longing for unity and his deep attachment to Ambedkarite political ideals.

Overall, Loknath's poetry blends sharp sarcasm, vivid imagery, and layered symbolism to demand urgent attention to Dalit welfare. His work acts both as critique and consciousness-raising alerting the marginalized community to the evolving forms of discrimination, while advancing Ambedkar's legacy of vigilant, analytical resistance against systems of domination disguised in new forms.

Conclusion:

Loknath Yashwant's *"The Broken Man: In Search of Homeland"* unveils a world shaped by religious conspiracies and historical oppression, laying bare the systemic methods used to marginalize Dalits. The titular "broken man" is rooted in Ambedkarite history a figure historically displaced by wandering tribes and later drawn toward Buddhism, only to be forced once more into the unending labyrinth of untouchability. Throughout history, the binary archetypes of oppressor and oppressed have stood in direct confrontation: the former wielding power and violence, the latter positioned in helpless resistance. These opposing forces engage in an enduring struggle, played out through cycles of revolution and counter-revolution.

Loknath situates guiding figures like Buddha, Mahatma Phule, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as moral and intellectual

anchors who offered transformative visions to uplift the marginalized. However, the poem also reflects on how counter-revolutionary forces adapt and re-emerge in new forms, continuing their oppression under the guise of modern structures. In post-independence India despite the constitutional framework authored by Ambedkar, oppressors have found new strategies through globalization and privatization to undermine Dalit rights, particularly by diluting the impact of reservation policies.

Loknath Yashwant's poetry maintains a vigilant critique of these evolving systems of exclusion. Through archetypal representations of both the oppressed and the oppressor, he reveals the enduring psychological and structural tendencies of each community. Yet, his work is not merely elegiac; many of his poems introduce strong Dalit characters who embody resistance, following Ambedkar's legacy and fearlessly confronting hegemonic power.

What distinguishes Loknath's collection is his reimagining of symbols: rejecting their conventional spiritual or religious associations and instead assigning them new socio-political meanings rooted in justice and equality. These symbolic interventions contribute significantly to the evolving aesthetics of Dalit literature. To fully grasp the depth of such work, it becomes essential to apply critical frameworks; such as archetypal theory grounded in Dalit perspectives rather than traditional Western paradigms alone. This approach allows for a more authentic and nuanced understanding of Dalit poetic creativity and its urgent social purpose.

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Ten.
Why Separate Dalit Aesthetics?

Dalit literature has undoubtedly established itself as a distinctive and complete genre in the literary landscape today. Its roots, which can be traced back 50 to 60 years in Maharashtra, have since flourished across various regional languages in India. Currently, Dalit literature is evolving towards a more mature phase, and there's much anticipation that even greater works are on the horizon. Talented Dalit writers from across the country are producing influential work, yet they often face harsh criticism from some non-Dalit critics. Several contentious questions arise in this context: Can any literature be considered Dalit? Why is the work of Dalit writers defined as Dalit literature, while that of non-Dalit writers is not? Should this literature be evaluated using standard literary criteria, or is there a need for a unique set of aesthetic principles? Additionally, some non-Dalit writers argue that Dalit literature should be critiqued as any other form of literature.

In light of these concerns, this research paper aims to explore the notion of a distinct Dalit Aesthetics, which may address these issues and its potential acceptance within broader literary discourse. When we delve into the concept of aesthetics, the fundamental question arises: What is aesthetics? The term 'aesthetics' originates from the Greek word 'aisthetikos,' meaning 'sense perception,' prompting us to

consider how this definition interacts with the essence of Dalit literature.

> "It is a term introduced into philosophical discussion in the mid-eighteenth century to refer to explorations of the nature of art and its place in human experience. As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics is largely concerned with general principles rather than with evaluations of specific works of art. In the past aestheticians attempted to define Beauty. Modern aesthetician, however, have explored the relationship of art to truth, whether subjective or objective, and the nature of the aesthetic experience in the beholder." (Beckson, 1989: 07)'

The concept of aesthetics in the West has evolved over centuries, with roots tracing back to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and extending through Kant and Hegel. In contrast, India's approach to aesthetics originates from the rich tradition of Sanskrit poetics, particularly *the Rasa Siddhanta* as articulated by Bharata in his seminal work, '*the Natyashastra.'* This text delves into the aesthetic principles of rasas (flavors) and their corresponding bhavas (emotions). *Rasa* represents the enjoyment derived from the harmonious blending of ingredients and qualities in artistic expressions.

In dramatic arts, there are eight recognized rasas: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, and marvelous, among others. Furthermore, the Kashmiri aesthetician Anandavardhana introduced a ninth rasa, known as shanta-rasa, reflecting a state of peace. However, human experiences inevitably encompass a broader range of emotions and sentiments, suggesting that these nine rasas alone cannot fully capture the complexity of human feelings. R. B. Patankar, while examining contemporary novels, also critiques this framework, stating, "Sanskrit poetics does not tell us how to discuss the moral problems presented in a contemporary

novel, and, further, how to evaluate that novel in the light of this discussion." (Devy, 2002: 393)

Modern Indian Aesthetics draws upon both Sanskrit traditions and Western influences, recognizing beauty in literary art linked to the concept of rasas. Unfortunately, contemporary Indian literary criticism often finds itself heavily influenced by Western frameworks, leading to a blending of Indian criticism and creative writing into this paradigm. The aesthetics present in Marathi, Hindi, and Indian literature in English stem from the pleasure and empathy elicited by engaging with various artistic forms. Notable figures like B.C. Mardhekar, Sharatchandra Muktibodh, and M.P. Renge have significantly contributed to discussions on beauty within Marathi literature, shaping its aesthetic principles. In the realm of Hindi literature, key contributors such as Namvar Singh, Nagendra, Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, Acharya Nandkishor, Dr. Giriraj Singh Agrawal, and Sudhir Pachauri have introduced essential concepts that enrich the aesthetic discourse in literature.

Could this concept be applied to Dalit literature?

In response to the critique that Dalit literature should be regarded as a subset of general literature, it is essential to examine whether the previously discussed concept of aesthetics applies to this genre. Dalit literature represents the voices of the untouchables and marginalized individuals in India, who endure poverty, oppression, illiteracy, and various forms of injustice. This body of work serves as a powerful medium for Dalits to articulate their historical suffering, often conveyed through expressions of anger and raw emotion, including the use of provocative language. As a literature of protest, it highlights the dynamics between the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the exploiters and the exploited. The harsh realities of Dalit life, their quest for identity, and aspirations for liberty, equality, and

fraternity are captured across diverse literary forms, including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, autobiographies, and critical prose.

Dalit literature prominently features poetry, short stories, and autobiographies, as these forms serve as powerful vehicles for articulating the long-standing pain and suffering experienced by Dalits. In contrast, the production of novels and folk literature has progressed at a slower rate. From its inception, Dalit literature has consistently challenged the entrenched Indian social hierarchy, particularly the caste system. With a focus on ideals such as liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice, Dalit writers convey deeply felt emotions that have been suppressed for centuries. This body of work delves into the identity struggles faced by Dalits in India, drawing parallels to the experiences of Black individuals in America. Consequently, the primary aim of this literature is not to entertain but to provoke thought regarding the harsh realities of Dalit life. It is evident that the experiences depicted are unique and often overlooked, leading Dalit writer-critics to argue that conventional literary aesthetics may not adequately apply to their work. Omprakash Valmiki aptly highlights this distinction.

> Aesthetics of Hindi literature is based on Sanskrit and Western Aesthetics. Therefore its measures proved inadequate in the evaluation of Dalit literature. The basis of Sanskrit literature is Feudalistic and Brahmanistic approach. So also, Western Literary Aesthetics is based on Capitalism and Feudalism.' (Valmiki, 2005: 45)

Sharankumar Limbale also says:

> Dalit literature is a new literary stream of the post-independence period. Not only is it new, its forms and purpose too different from those of savarna Marathi literature. Therefore, it cannot be appraised using traditional aesthetics."(Limbale, 2004: 115)

Both writers highlight the distinctive nature of Dalit literature, which is characterized by its unique aspect known as Dalit consciousness or *Dalit chetna*. This form of literature is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of Dalits, reflecting a life-oriented perspective that emerges from their awareness of human values. Dalit consciousness embodies the recognition of a Dalit's right to live with dignity and strives for freedom across political, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions. *Dalit consciousness* according to Sharankumar Limbale:

> …is a belief in rebellion against caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature. It is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness. (Limbale, 2004: 32)

Consequently, Dalit consciousness serves as a distinguishing factor between Canonical literature and Dalit literature. While much conventional literature is rooted in imagination and fantasy, interwoven with elements of reality, Dalit literature distinctly reflects the authentic experiences and challenges faced in the lives of Dalits. This discussion highlights that the foundation of Dalit literature fundamentally differs from that of Conventional literature. The lack of Dalit consciousness in Conventional literature suggests that popular aesthetic criteria fall short when it comes to assessing Dalit literature. Traditional aesthetic theorists have proposed the introduction of new rasas, or sentiments, into contemporary Literary Aesthetic Criticism. However, a pertinent question arises: can these newly introduced rasas adequately evaluate Dalit literature, particularly when they are conceived by non-Dalit aestheticians? Dalit writers assert that literature authored by Dalits should be acknowledged as authentic Dalit literature,

representing original creative expressions that stem from their lived experiences. In contrast, works by other writers that address Dalit life and experiences, primarily through imaginative lenses, often lack the depth of true Dalit consciousness and cannot be classified as Dalit literature. Dalit writers firmly reject any notion of compromise between reality and imagination, as well as between Dalit consciousness and fantasy.

When it comes to Dalit literary criticism, a non-Dalit writer can certainly assess Dalit literature. However, it is essential that they approach this task with empathy and an understanding of the caste-based issues faced by Dalits in India. A critic who lacks awareness of the socio-cultural, political, and economic challenges that Dalits encounter, and who disregards historical context, may struggle to evaluate this literature fairly. Omprakash Valmiki comments:

> "If a critic is unaware of Dalit community's life and also unaware of inflammation of their experiences, he may not evaluate with faith and impartially, for this it is not necessary to suffer the experience of Dalits, instead his deep study of social system in India, social plight, Indian culture, etc. are very important." (Valmiki, 2005: 59)

It is very important to note here that the criticism from non- Dalit writers should be on healthy grounds of new Dalit Aesthetics. He should bear in his mind some extra- literary considerations to understand Dalit chetna.

Reversing the Myth: The Dalit Standpoint

If we contemplate the possibility of integrating certain aesthetic principles from Traditional Aesthetics, we must examine how the original frameworks of criticism might challenge longstanding traditional views. This becomes clearer through a study of mythology. A pertinent example can be drawn from Indian mythology, where various figures from

well-known Indian epics prominently appear in both traditional literature and Dalit literature. The representation of these characters across these genres often sparks controversy. For instance, Dronacharya is depicted as an ideal guru in traditional narratives; conversely, he is portrayed as a negative figure in Dalit discourse due to his unjust treatment of Eklavya. Similarly, the killings of Shambuka in *the Ramayana* and Karna in *the Mahabharata* are typically justified within traditional literature, while they are vehemently condemned in Dalit narratives. These examples suggest that the Aesthetics that historically valorizes figures like Dronacharya and legitimizes the deaths of Shambuka and Karna raises a critical inquiry: can the same Aesthetic framework be applied to Dalit literature, which presents these mythic characters in a contradictory light? This point is further illustrated through a short story by Omprakash Valmiki titled *"Jinawar."* In this narrative, a pregnant woman is cast out by her in-laws, and a Dalit servant attempts to accompany her, hoping to understand her feelings. However, she initially remains silent until she ultimately instructs him to return and inform her in-laws that he has abandoned her. The servant, realizing the gravity of her plight, responds instinctively that he is not Laxmana who would forsake her in the wilderness. This moment showcases a dual respect for the woman and a portrayal of Laxmana as weak or negative, reflecting themes inherent in Dalit culture. This raises a pivotal question: how does Traditional or Conventional Literary Aesthetics engage with such contrasting themes? The answer to this inquiry is likely to be unsatisfactory. Dr. M.N. Wankhede further emphasizes this point:

> ... Indian aesthetics has no potential to evaluate the engrossed sense, there is no danger in National Seminar on Indian Literary Criticism in English abandoning such aesthetics, because Dalit literature will not get justice through such frame based role." (Valmiki, 2005: 49)

One additional observation can be made regarding the evaluation of language in Dalit literature by traditional aesthetic standards. Critics have often deemed this language uncultured, crude, and inappropriate. For instance, Namdeo Dhasal's poems in *'Golpitha'* faced significant criticism for these reasons. However, 'Golpitha' has ultimately emerged as a classic within Dalit literature. The Dalit community often resides in marginalized neighborhoods, enduring challenging circumstances that are reflected in their language. Their expressions of injustice are passionate, resulting in a vernacular that can be stark and confrontational; the use of harsh, sarcastic, and at times abusive language serves a deliberate purpose. Such strong reactions from characters portrayed in a negative light are entirely justifiable under the framework of new Dalit aesthetics, as they are a natural response to systemic injustice.

Dalit Aesthetics as a New Literary Theory:

Dalit literature is both comprehensive and distinctive in its significance. In response to harsh critiques from non-Dalit writers, there arose a pressing need among Dalit authors for a distinct literary theory that articulates the essence and themes of their work, as well as a framework for interpreting and evaluating Dalit literature. The development of this new theoretical perspective has emerged organically throughout the process of literary creation. Notable Dalit intellectuals and writers have articulated this theory in a fragmented manner through prefaces to various publications and speeches delivered at literary conferences. Recently, prominent Dalit writers such as Sharankumar Limbale and Omprakash Valmiki have contributed significantly to the discourse on Dalit aesthetics with their respective works, *"Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature"* and *"Aesthetic of Dalit Literature."* These publications illuminate the principles of this emerging foundation of Dalit literary theory known as Dalit Aesthetics.

A parallel can be drawn between *Dalit Aesthetics* and *Black Aesthetics*, the latter being a literary theory articulated by African American writers as they express their resistance against the dominant White culture that has marginalized them.

It is crucial to recognize that all Dalit writers draw inspiration from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's transformative ideas on social change. As such, it is essential for Dalit writers to come together in unity. Dalit literature fundamentally reflects the lived experiences of individuals and communities, emphasizing life itself. Furthermore, this genre serves as a powerful vehicle for social awareness. The principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice are central to Dalit aesthetics. Consequently, the aesthetics of Dalit literature is deeply rooted in the social consciousness and commitment of its creators. This focus informs how Dalit literature portrays the community's realities, including its suffering and its ongoing struggle for social change. Sharankumar Limbale proposes specific criteria for evaluating Dalit literature. They are:

- Artists must be motivated by their experience.
- Artist must socialize their experience.
- Artists' experience must have the strength to cross provincial boundaries.
- Artists' experiences must seem relevant to all time. (Limbale, 2004: 120)

These standards and criteria are undoubtedly significant for the evaluation of Dalit literature. They can also serve as valuable guidelines for critics and writers within this literary movement.

Conclusion:

Dalit literature represents a transformative force for social change. It is a distinct and burgeoning stream in post-

independence Indian literature, experiencing continuous growth across many major Indian languages. While in English it initially manifested as translated works, recent years have seen the emergence of original creative expressions in this language. Over the past 50 to 60 years, Dalit literature has experienced various challenges and fluctuations, often facing negative critiques from non-Dalit authors. When it first emerged in Marathi and Hindi, it struggled for recognition as an independent genre, often evaluated against traditional aesthetic standards an approach that did a disservice to the essence of this vital literary form. In truth, the emergence of Dalit literature is rooted in a long-standing struggle for identity, reflecting the aspirations and experiences of the Dalit community over centuries. The foundation of this literature is deeply intertwined with the social movements and philosophies of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, and it is fundamentally driven by a sense of Dalit consciousness.

Consequently, there exists a profound impetus among Dalit thinkers and writers to formulate their own critical theories that address Dalit consciousness. The development of Dalit Aesthetics is the result of a lengthy process that has unfolded over the past fifty years. Influential works by authors such as Sharankumar Limbale, Omprakash Valmiki, Baburao Bagul, Dr. Yashwant Manohar, and others have played a pivotal role in establishing a coherent framework for Dalit Consciousness. Given that traditional Indian Aesthetics and Western Aesthetics fall short in adequately assessing Dalit literary works, there is a pressing need for Dalit Literature to develop its own distinct Aesthetic. Contemporary Dalit Aesthetics represents a rational approach to understanding, which prioritizes thought over imagination. Interestingly, Dalit criticism shares some reflective qualities with Black Aesthetics. This research paper aims to explore the concept of a distinct Dalit Aesthetics by examining myths and short stories in a comparative analysis of Traditional and Dalit Literatures. The

findings suggest that the call for a Separate Aesthetics within Dalit Literature is not only justifiable but also necessary.

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Eleven.
Dalit Autobiographies: Cultural Transformation through Buddhist Doctrine

Introduction

Since antiquity, Buddhism has stood as one of the most influential religious and philosophical systems, initiating profound socio-cultural transformations first within the Indian subcontinent and subsequently across various regions of the East and West. Its impact on societal norms and traditions has been significant, contributing to the evolution of rational thought and modern sensibilities among diverse populations, irrespective of race, class, or creed. Central to Buddhism is its humanistic orientation, which places the individual at the heart of its doctrine, emphasizing holistic development and the alleviation of suffering. This inclusive and compassionate perspective has resonated with individuals across religious boundaries.

Buddhism's emphasis on a scientific and rational outlook eschewing superstition and focusing on experiential understanding has further reinforced its philosophical credibility. Notably, the core doctrines of *impermanence (anicca), non-self (anattā),* and *the attainment of Nibbāna* within one's lifetime have historically stimulated intellectual discourse and debate. The perceived potential for individual and communal welfare through the practice of these principles has led many

communities to adopt the Buddha Dhamma not merely as a belief system, but as a comprehensive way of life.

In contemporary times, the Eastern and South Asian regions where Buddhism remains a prominent religious tradition have experienced significant socio-cultural transformations, particularly evident in literary and documentary sources. Biographies and novels centered on the lives of Buddhist monks and nuns in these regions provide valuable insights into these transformative periods. Notable works such as Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah, Mae Chee Kaew: Her Journey to Spiritual Awakening & Enlightenment, and Venerable Acariya Mun Bhuridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography illustrate the process by which local populations transitioned into Buddhist communities, often reflecting broader shifts in social consciousness and spiritual practice.

A parallel trajectory can be observed in India with the conversion of historically marginalized Pre-Aryan Dalit communities to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in 1956. This event marked a pivotal moment in the socio-political and religious history of India. The autobiographies of several prominent Dalit writers provide first-hand accounts of the transformative impact of this conversion. Given that Dalit communities embraced Buddhism relatively recently and have since evolved into a more socially progressive group, it becomes essential to explore the foundational principles of Buddhist philosophy particularly those emphasized by Dr. Ambedkar and to analyze their influence on the Dalit social and cultural identity.

The Doctrine of Impermanence (Anitya)

In Buddhist philosophy, the concept of *Anitya* impermanence asserts that all phenomena within *samsara* are subject to constant change. The Buddha taught that everything conditioned is inherently transient and in a continual state of

flux. As Narada explains, "Changeableness is a characteristic of everything that is conditioned. All conditioned things are constantly changing, not remaining static for two consecutive moments. Mind, in fact, changes even faster than matter." (Narada, 1979: 462)

This doctrine is typically examined through three principal dimensions. The first concerns the impermanence of composite entities. All material forms arise from the combination of elemental substances and ultimately disintegrate back into these elements upon death. As Asanga, founder of *the Vijnanavada School*, describes, "The body of a living being consists of the combination of four great elements, viz., earth, water, fire and air, and when this combination is resolved into the four component elements, dissolution ensues. This is what is called the impermanence of a composite entity" (Ambedkar, 1997: 240).

The second aspect pertains to the impermanence of life. Each moment that passes is lost forever, and human existence progresses through irreversible stages childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age without any fixed or enduring self. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar observes, "A human being is always changing, always growing. He is not the same at two different moments of his life" (Ambedkar, 1997: 240). This continual transformation underscores the ephemeral nature of individual life.

The third aspect of *Anitya* addresses the subtle but ongoing change occurring within living beings. While the inevitability of death is readily understood, it is more challenging to grasp the continuous process of becoming that occurs during life itself. Ambedkar notes that while the mortality of living beings is easy to accept, understanding how individuals are constantly transforming while alive requires deeper reflection. (Ambedkar 1997: 240–241) In this context, Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school, emphasizes the centrality of *śūnyatā*

(emptiness), asserting that "it is on account of *śūnyatā* that everything becomes possible; without it nothing in the world would be possible" (Sogen, 2009: 14). Ultimately, the doctrine of impermanence affirms that all aspects of existence including life and the universe itself are marked by constant transformation. Therefore, change is not an exception but a fundamental characteristic of reality, and death, as the culmination of this ongoing process, is both natural and inevitable.

The Doctrine of Non-Soul (Anatta)

The doctrine of *Anatta*, or non-soul, constitutes one of the foundational tenets of Buddhist philosophy. Contrary to the Hindu conception of a permanent, unchanging soul (*Atman*), Buddhism categorically denies the existence of any enduring self. Instead, the Buddha advanced the theory of *Namarupa* a compound term denoting the psychophysical constitution of a sentient being. According to this framework, what we conventionally refer to as a "person" is merely an aggregate of physical and mental constituents. The body is composed of the four great elements: *Earth, Water, Fire,* and *Air* while consciousness arises as a result of their interaction.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar draws an analogy between the emergence of consciousness and principles in modern science. He writes, "There is an electric field and wherever there is an electric field it is always accompanied by a magnetic field. No one knows how the magnetic field is created or how it arises. But it always exists along with the electric field" (Ambedkar, 1997: 263). By this analogy, Ambedkar suggests that consciousness, like a magnetic field, emerges naturally and unexplainably from certain conditions without necessitating a separate, metaphysical entity such as a soul.

Furthermore, the Buddha challenges the very notion of a soul by questioning its function. Since all faculties traditionally

attributed to the soul such as thought, emotion, and volition are already explained by consciousness and mental formations, positing a soul becomes redundant. As such, the soul, stripped of all functions, is rendered conceptually meaningless. The Buddha, therefore, rejected its existence as a metaphysical abstraction unsupported by experiential or logical evidence.

In essence, the doctrine of *Anatta* not only refutes the permanence of self but also offers a dynamic, interdependent view of existence grounded in observable processes, rather than metaphysical assumptions.

Nibbana: The Enlightenment

Nibbana, a term derived from the Pali language, literally signifies the cessation or "departure" from craving. Within the *Adittapariyaya Sutta (The Fire Sermon),* the Buddha vividly illustrates the existential condition of sentient beings: "The whole world is in flames. By what fire is it kindled? By the fire of lust, hatred, and delusion; by the fire of birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair it is kindled" (Narada, 1988: 492). In this context, *Nibbana* represents the extinguishing of these metaphorical fires and, thus, the end of suffering.

Distinct from the Hindu concept of *Moksha*, which is typically envisioned as liberation attained after death, the Buddha redefined the spiritual goal as *Nibbana*, a state that can be realized within one's lifetime. He emphasized that liberation was not an abstract or deferred promise but an achievable reality through disciplined practice. For Buddhists, therefore, attaining *Nibbana* complete enlightenment is the ultimate spiritual aim.

The path to *Nibbana* is articulated in the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, where he expounded the *Noble Eightfold Path* as the essential means to liberation. This path encompasses right view, right intention, right speech, right

action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. As Prof. Yamakami Sogen explains, "The realization of universal impermanence and non-soul leads to the eradication of manifold causes of *samsara*, such as illusion, evil, passion, etc., while a correct understanding of the third principle helps in laying the foundation of the fabric of true enlightenment and supreme bliss." (Sogen, 2009: 35).

Further elaborating the Buddha's teachings, his chief disciple Sariputta described *Nibbana* as the outcome of walking *the Middle Way*: "Brethren, know you that greed is vile, and vile is resentment. To shed this greed and this resentment, there is the Middle Way... leading us on to peace, insight, enlightenment and Nibbana... this, Almsmen, is the Middle Way" (Ambedkar, 1997: 395).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also emphasized a practical and ethical interpretation of *Nibbana*. He writes, "Nibbana means enough control over passion so as to enable one to walk on the path of righteousness. It was not intended to mean anything more. That *Nibbana* is another name for righteous life is made clear by the Buddha himself to Radha" (Ambedkar, 1997, p. 237). This view reinforces the notion of *Nibbana* as a lived ethical experience, grounded in personal discipline and moral conduct.

Importantly, the Buddha asserted that *Nibbana* is attainable by all, regardless of gender or social class. His teachings consistently emphasized equality, extending full spiritual agency to women and marginalized groups. In this way, the realization of *Nibbana* not only marks spiritual liberation but also reflects the inclusive and egalitarian nature of the Buddha's path.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path constitutes a central element of the Buddha's teachings and forms the practical framework for

achieving liberation from suffering, as outlined in the Four Noble Truths. It is regarded as the path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha* (suffering) and the realization of *Nibbana* (enlightenment). As Walpola Rahula observed, "Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this path" (O'Brien, 2015). The Buddha's first discourse on this path, delivered at Sarnath, is traditionally referred to as the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, or the *"Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma,"* symbolizing the commencement of his teaching mission.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in his seminal work *Buddha or Karl Marx*, emphasized the transformative and ethical purpose of the Noble Eightfold Path. He wrote that its ultimate aim is "to establish the kingdom of righteousness and thereby to banish sorrow and unhappiness from the face of the world," underscoring its relevance not only as a personal spiritual path but also as a foundation for social and moral upliftment.

The path is typically divided into three overarching categories: *Paññā (wisdom), Sīla (ethical conduct),* and *Samādhi (mental discipline*). These dimensions are composed of the following eight interconnected factors: *right view and right intention (wisdom); right speech, right action,* and *right livelihood (moral conduct);* and *right effort, right mindfulness*, and *right concentration (mental discipline)*. Together, they form a comprehensive guide to ethical living, meditative practice, and philosophical insight, aimed at cultivating a life free from suffering and grounded in compassion, awareness, and moral clarity.

Revival of Buddhism by Dr. Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar

The mass conversion to Buddhism led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1956 was not an isolated spiritual act but the pinnacle of a sociopolitical movement that began in the 1920s.

This movement, initiated and guided by Ambedkar, aimed at the emancipation of Dalits and other marginalized communities from the entrenched caste-based hierarchies of Hindu society. The adoption of Buddhism served not only as a religious realignment but as a strategic framework for asserting self-respect, dignity, and the long-term socio-economic advancement of historically oppressed groups.

Ambedkar's life trajectory reveals a consistent and deliberate progression toward a transformative goalrealizing *Prabuddha Bharat (Enlightened India). His* vision of a just society found its ideological and ethical foundation in Buddhist philosophy, which he viewed as essential for building a future rooted in equality, rationality, and compassion. As A. K. Narain notes, Ambedkar's concern, like that of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, was centered on alleviating human suffering, particularly the suffering caused by social exclusion and systemic humiliation. For Ambedkar, Buddhism offered a comprehensive way of life capable of addressing both spiritual and material aspects of human suffering. (Narain, 1994: 78)

Ambedkar's academic training in the United States and the United Kingdom played a critical role in shaping his understanding of social reform. During his studies, he analyzed the socio-economic structures that contributed to the marginalization of Dalits and examined how European societies had transitioned from feudal, stratified systems to more egalitarian and democratic models. This comparative analysis led him to conclude that religious and cultural transformation was essential for true social progress in India.

The formal act of conversion on October 14, 1956, in Nagpur where Ambedkar, accompanied by approximately five million Dalit followers, embraced Buddhism symbolized both a spiritual awakening and a radical socio-political statement. This event marked the beginning of the modern revival of Buddhism in India and catalyzed a significant cultural and

intellectual movement within Dalit communities. The post-conversion period witnessed a surge in Dalit literature, self-expression, and activism, particularly during the first decade of India's independence, indicating the deep and lasting impact of Ambedkar's initiative on India's socio-religious landscape.

Transformation of the Dalit Community in the Context of Buddhist Conversion

Gail Omvedt characterizes the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956 as the inception of a Buddhist renaissance in India a moment that significantly altered the socio-cultural fabric of Dalit life. This event marked a profound shift in the collective consciousness of Dalit communities, catalyzing changes not only in religious identity but also in self-perception, cultural expression, and psychological outlook. Within the first decade following the conversion, there was a notable demographic increase in the number of individuals identifying as Buddhists, reflecting a broader movement of self-assertion and ideological realignment.

The emergence of a distinct Buddhist identity among Dalits symbolized the beginning of a new socio-religious era one characterized by a conscious rejection of caste-based inferiority and the embrace of self-respect. This identity shift, rooted in Ambedkarite Buddhism, fostered a sense of dignity and autonomy that had long been denied under the rigid Hindu caste order. A particularly transformative aspect of this renaissance was seen in the cultural domain, where the proliferation of Dalit literature served as a form of protest and self-expression. The movement enabled Dalits to articulate their historical experiences, aspirations, and critiques of caste oppression through literary means.

This psychological transformation is described by Namdeo Dhasal, who underscores the liberation from mental and

emotional subjugation brought about by conversion. As Dhasal notes:

> "Conversion to Buddhism freed the Scheduled Castes from mental and psychological enslavement. Religion has an attraction for the common man and it was not easy to change his attitude towards it. The Buddhists have liberated themselves from old ideas of Karma and destiny and from worship of Hindu Gods. To some extent this facilitated their adopting rational attitudes to their conditions in society, the chance of their activity striving to change their conditions for better." *(Sharma, 2006, p. 68)*

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's leadership in the Dalit movement laid the foundation for this cultural reawakening. His reinterpretation of Buddhism, which emphasized rationality, equality, and social justice, deeply influenced the ideological orientation of emerging Dalit literature. The radical image of the Buddha articulated by Ambedkar often referred to as a symbol of *"Ambedkarism"* was adopted by Dalit writers as a framework for cultural resistance and identity reconstruction. As such, the literary and cultural manifestations of post-conversion Dalit society remain intrinsically linked to Ambedkar's vision and reinterpretation of Buddhism.

Dalit Autobiography: Documenting Dalit's Transformation

Dalit autobiographies have brought the stark realities of hunger, poverty, humiliation, systemic oppression, injustice, and the enduring struggle for survival into the literary domain. These narratives tend to operate within two interconnected paradigms: the first centers on the journey "from being to becoming," while the second contrasts the experiences of the "pre-conversion Dalit community" with those of the "post-conversion transformed community." Central to both paradigms are the influences of Buddhism and Dr. B.R.

Ambedkar, whose philosophy deeply shaped the social and spiritual transformation of Dalit lives.

These autobiographical texts offer a powerful lens into the lived experiences of Dalits, historically marginalized within the rigid structures of the Indian caste system. Serving as reflective documents, they function not only as personal testimonies but also as collective mirrors of the Dalit condition. Through them, the hidden and often silenced dimensions of Dalit life are made visible to the broader world.

Ambedkarite Buddhism emerges in these narratives as a transformative force, catalyzing profound socio-cultural shifts. The adoption of Buddhist philosophy, as inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, is portrayed as initiating a significant reconfiguration of identity, dignity, and life conditions among Dalit individuals and communities. As Singh notes, "these autobiographies embody the "authenticities of experience" narratives grounded in lived realities that form the core of Dalit literature across genres, including poetry and fiction." (Sing, 2013: 14)

Importantly, these autobiographies do more than document a religious or philosophical shift; they trace a trajectory of upliftment and social mobility, mapping the gradual elevation in the quality of life among Dalits. Several notable autobiographical works distinctly highlight this journey of transformation and empowerment.

Rejection of God, Soul (Anatta), and Acceptance of Rationality

The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was not merely a religious act but a socio-political statement grounded in the rejection of what were perceived as illogical and oppressive belief systems. By taking *the Twenty-Two Vows*, Dalits deliberately distanced themselves from doctrines that had historically legitimized

their social subordination. This ideological shift marked a transition towards a rational and ethical framework rooted in Buddhist thought. Consequently, the rejection of previous religious practices became a recurring theme in Dalit narratives following the conversion.

Shantabai Kamble illustrates this transformation in her account of post-conversion village life: "After the Dharmantar (conversion of religion, refers to the Dhamma Diksha, conversion to Buddhism of Dr. Ambedkar and his followers) the fairs are mentioned as an event to see rather than ritually participate." (Rege, 2006: 161). Kamble further emphasizes the development of rationality in her own thinking, noting that even during her school years, she consciously chose not to enter Hindu temples.

A similar perspective is found in Dr. Jatava's autobiography *The Silent Soldier*, where he connects his post-doctoral research to the social philosophy of the Buddha, which he interprets as a direct challenge to Hindu orthodoxy. He writes, "The D. Litt. thesis was in fact, an elaboration of the ideology of Ambedkar Movement. Dr. Ambedkar had taught us that neither fate, nor god, or soul, could save the downtrodden of India. For such ideas did not support man's freedom to change in the present situation, they dictate man to do his duties as prescribed in varnashram dharma and to wait to be born in the next birth in a family according to karma presently done." (Jatava, 1999: 67).

Ambedkarite Rationalism and the Rejection of Superstition among Dalit Youths

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's influence triggered a profound transformation in the mindset of Dalit youths, particularly in regions like Nagpur, where many spontaneously abandoned their inherited religious beliefs in favor of rational thinking.

Vasant Moon, in his autobiography *Growing Untouchables of India*, reflects on this ideological shift:

> "The youth read Ambedkar's call in the Janata weekly. There it was written 'the Hindus gods were not brought for us; don't do their puja. Their festivals are not ours; don't observe them' it was possible for the older generation to forsake the entire Hindu culture one by one. Not only this, the youth were conscious that if such an attempt were made all the wrestlers would be against them." (Moon, 2002: 43).

This narrative indicates not only a departure from ritual practice but also a growing political consciousness among Dalit youth regarding the social risks of such a stance.

Wamanrao Godbole, a staunch Ambedkarite figure in Nagpur, played a crucial role in disseminating this rationalist ethos. His speeches motivated young Dalits to critically examine their inherited traditions. He is quoted as saying: "We should not travel on the paths of other. We only want to reform our community, our neighbourhood. Before we adopt another religion, we have to wipe out culture of this religion." (Moon, 2002: 44). His advocacy reinforced the idea that true liberation required a cultural as well as spiritual break from Hindu orthodoxy.

The rationalist wave that followed Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism significantly diminished belief in superstitions, spirits, and other supernatural elements within Dalit communities. Moon recounts his own experience: "at nights I couldn't sleep until three or four in the morning. I kept my eyes half opened just so much as a tall tree lets in spots of light through its shadows. However, no such things as a ghost appeared to me. Attababa, Spearman used to roam throughout the night in burial grounds. He would say 'I have been wandering for so many years in the cemetery. I have not seen any ghosts, Ghosts are not outside of us, they are in our

minds." (Moon, 2002: 117). This shift illustrates how Dalit rationalism challenged and deconstructed internalized fears rooted in traditional beliefs.

Dr. Narendra Jadhav provides another illustrative example through his father's strict commitment to rationalism. Damu, an ardent follower of Ambedkar, openly condemned superstition and sorcery. However, in his absence, Jadhav's mother Sonu, influenced by her mother-in-law, once sought help from a witch doctor to treat her ill son, Sudha. Upon discovering this, Damu reacted angrily and "slapped him instantly," demonstrating his zero-tolerance stance toward practices rooted in irrationality.

Similarly, Urmila Pawar, in her recollection of the post-conversion era, describes the broader social changes that took place within the Dalit community. As a young girl, she witnessed a visible decline in belief in the supernatural: "All such things ghosts, and supernatural experiences stopped abruptly after the conversion ceremony took place." (Pawar, 2003: 109). This transformation was further reinforced through localized conversion events that followed the mass conversion at Nagpur. Pawar recounts participating in one such ceremony held at Gogte College in Ratnagiri, where people enthusiastically embraced the new faith. One of the most immediate and symbolic acts following the conversion was the community-wide abandonment of idol worship: Dalits actively discarded images of Hindu deities in adherence to the Buddhist principles and *the Twenty-Two Vows* laid out by Ambedkar.

Dalit autobiographical narratives thus serve as rich sources for understanding how Ambedkar's call for conversion catalyzed a rationalist cultural revolution. These accounts document the deliberate and collective rejection of ritualism, idolatry, and superstition practices viewed as mechanisms of marginalization and instruments of caste-based oppression.

The Twenty-Two Vows functioned not merely as doctrinal affirmations but as transformative commitments that reshaped the spiritual and cultural identity of the Dalit community.

The Universal Law of Impermanence and the Reflections of Dalit Writers

Central to Buddhist philosophy is the doctrine of *anicca*, or impermanence the understanding that all phenomena are transient, subject to change, and ultimately dissolution. Nothing in existence remains static; forms may shift, decline, and disappear, yet the elements themselves persist in a cyclical transformation. Dalit autobiographical literature, particularly post-Ambedkarite writings, reflects this fundamental Buddhist insight. The experiences of aging, illness, and death are not merely personal episodes in these narratives but serve as profound contemplations on the impermanence of life. Through such reflections, both individual and collective wisdom emerge.

Dr. Jatava offers a poignant example in his autobiography, where the sudden death of his father becomes a defining moment of existential awakening. He writes, "When I was at the far end of my eleventh year, my father was suddenly taken away from among us. He was still in robust health, when a choked throat painlessly ended his earthly abode and left us all deeply bereaved." (Jatava, 1999:3) Further, his encounters with death in the school laboratory, where human skeletons and dead animals were displayed, contributed to his philosophical growth: "We saw mother growing old and the sister attaining youth. But none of us felt defeated; rather we all set in towards the days of the light, progress and happiness" (Jatava, 1999: 13). These experiences highlight how impermanence was not a cause of despair but a catalyst for spiritual insight and moral clarity.

Similarly, Daya Pawar's seminal work *Baluta* records the gradual physical decline and eventual death of his father. While his father's addictions to alcohol and promiscuity had once fostered feelings of resentment in the author, his father's deterioration ultimately led Pawar toward a deeper understanding of human suffering and transience. This realization anchored his evolving worldview, aligning closely with the Buddhist principle that personal insight often arises through confrontation with mortality.

In *The Outcaste*, Sharankumar Limbale presents a bold and unflinching account of his early confrontations with death, framed through the daily realities of Dalit life. As a child, he was routinely exposed to the decaying bodies of animals a task normalized by caste duties but philosophically jarring. These experiences invoked a strong sense of aversion and introspection. He writes, "The skeleton of a dead animal lay rotten for many days. Ribs, the jaw, eye-sockets, horns, teeth, legs, everything looked so gruesome. In school we were once shown a human skeleton which looked far more horrifying." (Limbale, 2005: 15). Through such observations, Limbale internalized the inevitability of decay, reinforcing the understanding that all life ends in dissolution.

In Buddhist cosmology, it is believed that the four constituent elements of the body earth, water, fire, and air reintegrate with the natural world upon death. Dalit writers' meditations on death and physical decline echo this philosophical framework, demonstrating an internalization of *anicca*. Vasant Moon, for instance, describes his confrontation with impermanence during the cremation of Dr. Ambedkar. Standing beside Ambedkar's funeral pyre in Dadar, Mumbai, he experienced a moment of existential clarity, wherein death became not an end, but a transformative truth affirming the transient nature of existence.

Through these personal narratives, Dalit writers articulate a deepened awareness of impermanence as a lived reality. Their detailed attention to the processes of aging, illness, and death functions not merely as autobiographical record but as a form of spiritual testimony. This understanding, in turn, fosters wisdom, encourages ethical conduct, and aligns with Buddhist teachings that emphasize the cultivation of right action (*kamma*) and merit generation as pathways to a meaningful and liberated life.

Nibbana (Enlightenment) and the Emergence of New Understanding:

In Buddhist philosophy, *Nibbana* represents the highest state of liberation, attainable through the cessation of desire and adherence to the Noble Eightfold Path. It is understood as the awakening of the *Bodhi* mind the realization of wisdom and the experience of spiritual freedom. For Dalit writers, the aspiration toward Nibbana is interpreted through a sociopolitical lens: liberation from the oppressive structures of caste and a reaffirmation of human dignity. In this context, the project of restoring human values and ethical consciousness, as initiated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, becomes central to Dalit literary expression. While these writers pursued merit and spiritual elevation through Buddhist practices, they were also simultaneously engaged in the urgent task of emancipating their community from the inherited injustices of caste hierarchy.

The autobiographies of Dalit writers frequently illustrate a deliberate renunciation of worldly desires and the pursuit of ethical living. These narratives reflect a conscious commitment to Buddhist moral principles and humanistic values, often emerging from the personal and collective experiences of suffering, discrimination, and spiritual introspection. The path toward merit generation and self-purification, as advocated in

Ambedkarite Buddhism, is recurrently visible in their life stories.

Daya Pawar, in *Baluta*, recounts his upbringing in the underprivileged Nagpada neighborhood of Mumbai, bordering the red-light districts of *Kamathipura* and *Golpitha*. The surrounding environment was rife with moral decay cheating, prostitution, and substance abuse were pervasive. Yet, Pawar remained unaffected by these vices, crediting the protective guidance of his mother and the value of education. He writes of his disdain for his father, a habitual drunkard and womanizer, and his own growing aversion to such behaviors. His personal reflections reveal a persistent contemplation on the moral and social upliftment of his community, which he viewed as entangled in cycles of degradation.

Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* presents a compelling account of internalized caste trauma and moral conflict. Born an *Akkarmashi*, he experienced identity erasure and social exclusion from both within and outside his community. His anger toward those responsible for this injustice is evident in his narration. When his sister Nagi began a relationship with Nandu Patil, he feared that she would replicate the painful history of illegitimacy endured by their mother. "He shouted at his sister and beat her and tried to dissuade her from such illicit relationship." In another instance, Limbale recalls the emotional tension involved in retaliating against caste-based humiliation. A girl named Shobhi, from an upper-caste background, frequently insulted him and his friends. Seeking to "avenge the insult," he and his friend Parshya confronted her alone on the way to the river. "Parshya held her hand to make her feel insulted and polluted and a thought to deflower her occurred to them. But some virtue dissuades them from committing that sin." This moment signifies a critical turning point wherein Limbale

exercises self-control and moral discernment, aligning with Buddhist teachings on restraint and ethical conduct.

Writers such as Dr. D.R. Jatava, Vasant Moon, Sharankumar Limbale, and Urmila Pawar frequently disclose, either consciously or unconsciously, the gradual sublimation of material and sensual desires. Having been directly influenced by the Ambedkarite movement and Buddhist conversion, their family environments increasingly embodied the values of compassion, rationality, and non-attachment. Despite growing up in socio-culturally toxic spaces, both Daya Pawar and Sharankumar Limbale eventually rejected the pull of desire, choosing instead the path of education, self-discipline, and intellectual inquiry key elements in the cultivation of *sila (morality)* and *panna (wisdom),* foundational for the attainment of *Nibbana.*

Their autobiographies collectively document the post-conversion moral transformation of Dalit communities. Following the adoption of Buddhism, the rise of monasteries and an increase in ordained monks within the Ambedkarite movement led to a widespread change in ethical behavior. These transformations gave rise to "an intellectual and enlightened Dalits." Education was central to this shift, fostering a form of wisdom conducive to peaceful coexistence and the cultivation of a secular and inclusive social environment. Many members of these communities abandoned caste-based occupations and began aspiring toward dignified professions in administration, education, and corporate sectors.

The increased engagement with Buddhist monasteries also reflected a growing spiritual identity. Participation in observance days and meditation practices helped develop moral discipline and mindfulness within these communities. In this context, the observance of key aspects of *the Noble Eightfold Path sila (ethical conduct), samadhi (mental discipline),* and *panna*

(wisdom) is increasingly evident in the lives of neo-Buddhist Dalits. These autobiographical texts, therefore, do not merely narrate personal journeys; they embody the collective striving for enlightenment *Nibbana* through the rejection of desire, development of virtue, and dedication to the Ambedkarite vision of social justice through Buddhism.

Conclusion

The Buddha's doctrine of *Anicca* (impermanence) and *Anatta* (non-self) marks a defining departure from metaphysical and theistic traditions, rendering Buddhism a rational and experiential path grounded in observable reality. These principles were introduced in a historical context marked by deep-rooted superstition, ritualism, and speculative doctrines involving the afterlife, divine retribution, and the hierarchy of spiritual beings. Buddha's challenge to these ideas emerged from the broader *Samana* tradition, which had already begun to question the religious orthodoxy and the authority of the Brahmanical priesthood. His teachings, however, went further—by rejecting the idea of a permanent soul and positing suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence, and non-self as the fundamental marks of existence, he reoriented spiritual practice toward self-awareness, ethical living, and liberation in the here and now.

The relevance of these teachings becomes especially clear in the context of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's socio-religious movement among Dalits. Ambedkar reinterpreted Buddhism not merely as a religion, but as a vehicle of social emancipation and moral transformation. In rejecting the dogmas of karma and caste embedded within the *varna* system, Ambedkar reclaimed the rational and ethical core of the Buddha's philosophy and recast it in a modern, democratic framework. His version of Buddhism, often referred to as Navayana Buddhism, categorically rejected beliefs in the afterlife, soul, and divine salvation. Instead, it emphasized ethical

responsibility, self-discipline, and community solidarity. For Ambedkar, the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism was not only a spiritual awakening but also an assertion of dignity and identity, aiming to liberate a historically oppressed people from the psychological chains of caste-based inequality.

The autobiographical narratives of Dalit writers such as Vasant Moon, Daya Pawar, Sharankumar Limbale, and Dr. Jatava provide rich, lived accounts of this transformation. These texts document the evolution of the self and the community through the lens of Buddhist principles, particularly through the understanding of *impermanence* (*Anicca*), *non-self* (*Anatta*), and *the rejection of superstitions* that had long served as tools of exploitation. Their personal struggles and ethical resolutions reveal a deep internalization of the Noble Eightfold Path particularly *Sila* (morality), *Samadhi (mental discipline)*, and *Paññā (wisdom)* not only as theoretical tenets but as transformative practices that led to tangible changes in their lives and social consciousness.

Moreover, the establishment and increasing activity of Buddhist monasteries among neo-Buddhist communities have facilitated greater access to meditative practices, fostering a culture of reflection, ethical conduct, and intellectual inquiry. This shift is evident in the changing professional aspirations of the Dalit youth, who are increasingly moving away from caste prescribed occupations and entering fields of education, administration, and corporate sectors. These changes indicate a reorientation of life goals and values in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

In essence, the Dalit autobiographical corpus serves as a powerful archive of moral evolution and rational awakening. It captures the transition of an oppressed group from cultural marginalization toward a self-assertive and philosophically grounded community. Through the embrace of Buddhist values, especially the insights into impermanence and non-self,

Dalit writers not only articulate personal emancipation but also contribute to a collective vision of social transformation. Their journey toward *Nibbana*, though shaped by historical and structural constraints, is deeply rooted in an ethical and rational worldview one that continues to shape contemporary Buddhist discourse in India. This intellectual and spiritual movement, ignited by Ambedkar and carried forward by countless voices in Dalit literature, affirms Buddhism's enduring relevance as a path of liberation, dignity, and human flourishing.

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Philosophy and Ideas in Literary Criticism

Introduction

Conventional aesthetics traditionally draws from Indian mythology and scriptures, where Dalits have often been positioned as marginalized 'others.' In contrast, Dalit literature emerges as a powerful form of protest, illuminating the dynamics between the powerful and the powerless, oppressors and the oppressed, and exploiters and the exploited. This literature is rooted in the experiences of life, arising from *Dalit Chetana (Consciousness),* which embodies the recognition of human values denied under the caste hierarchy. Themes of harsh life experiences, struggles for identity, and aspirations for liberty, equality, and fraternity are vividly expressed across various genres within Dalit literature.

The principles of *Buddhist Socialism* and *Dalit Consciousness* notably differentiate Dalit literature from canonical works. Sharankumar Limbale suggests that the conversion to Buddhism opened new cultural vistas for Dalits, paving the way for the birth of Dalit literature. Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki emphasizes the significance of Dr. Ambedkar's life struggle as foundational to this body of work. Unlike conventional literature, which often aims to entertain, Dalit literature seeks to challenge readers by confronting the stark realities of Dalit life. Both Limbale and Valmiki assert that conventional aesthetics do not adequately apply to Dalit literature due to its distinct value system and philosophical underpinnings; thus, it necessitates a unique aesthetic

framework grounded in Buddhist cultural values. Against this backdrop, the present research paper endeavors to delve into the essential role of philosophical foundations and human values in shaping Dalit Aesthetics.

According to Western philosophy, aesthetics explores the nature and value of art, as well as our reactions to natural objects, framed in terms like *'the beautiful' and 'the ugly.'* Philosophers often highlight these concepts in their discussions and critiques. Edmund Burke's book, *'On the Sublime and Beautiful' (1757),* played a significant role in shaping contemporary thought by distinguishing between the 'Beautiful' and the 'Sublime.'

Modern literary theories, however, shift the focus to elements such as representation, expression, form, style, and sentimentality. They also consider the role of response, attitude, and emotions in aesthetic experiences. Recently, Hegelian theories have influenced modern aesthetics by linking various art forms to their unique spiritual aspects. In Western theories, expression is viewed as either 'intentional' or a 'material' object of aesthetic experience. Clive Bell defined art through its distinctive feature, termed *"significant form."* Additionally, the *"point of view"* becomes crucial in the Western study of beauty, where experiences are shaped by one's understanding of the object perceived as beautiful. Kant's philosophy emphasizes rationality in artistic judgment; he views a rational individual as one who lets reason guide their thoughts and actions. Western philosophers identified two paradoxes *'form'* and *'content'* considered essential and inseparable. While some scholars advocate for imagination as a separate mental faculty, contrasting with thinkers like Kant and Hegel, who assert that imagination is an intrinsic part of how experiences unfold. In contrast, Jean-Paul Sartre delves into the creative imagination that human's exercise, which underpins aesthetic experiences. In Indian aesthetics, the foundation is rooted in Sanskrit poetics, particularly the

concept of *Rasa Siddhanta* developed by Bharata in *'Natyashastra'*. This work elaborates on aesthetic concepts of rasas and their corresponding bhavas. Bharata's theory originally applied to poetry and theatre, where Rasa encompasses the enjoyment derived from the skillful combination of ingredients and their qualities. He identified eight rasas (sentiments) in drama and dramatic representation: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, and marvellous. Kashmiri aesthetician Anandawardhana later introduced a ninth rasa, known as *shanta-rasa*.

Modern Indian critics tend to separate imagination from experience. They argue that human experiences cannot be adequately measured solely based on imagination, especially within nine broad emotional categories of rasas. Given that Indian classical theory relies heavily on the faculty of imagination, these nine rasas fall short of truly capturing the practical realities that arise from new creative expressions. Additionally, Indian classical theory does not address the moral dilemmas presented by a stratified society and the complexities of our modern, globalized world. R.B. Patankar also critiques this theory in relation to novel writing, asserting, "Sanskrit poetics does not tell us how to discuss the moral problems presented in a contemporary novel, and, further, how to evaluate that novel in the light of this discussion" (Devy 2007: 393). Dalit Aesthetics and classical aesthetics represent two opposing frameworks in terms of their guiding principles. As articulated by its proponents, while pleasure may serve as the backbone of Brahmanism, pain is central to Dalit aesthetics. This pain drives the narrative of their history and existence, urging them toward a quest for justice and retribution (Saksena 2013: 41). The aesthetics found in Marathi, Hindi, and Indian literature written in English often revolve around the emotions of pleasure and empathy that arise from engaging with objects. Notable figures in Marathi literature, such as B.C. Mardhekar, Sharatchandra Muktibodh, and M.P. Renge, have significantly

contributed to the development of its aesthetic discourse. In the realm of Hindi literature, scholars like Namvar Singh, Nagendra, Mahavirprasad Dwivedi, Acharya Nandkishor, Dr. Giriraj Singh Agrawal, and Sudhir Pachauri have also made key contributions to literary aesthetics.

The topic of separate Dalit Aesthetics in Dalit Literary criticism has sparked significant discussion and debate. Within the Indian social hierarchy, Dalits have faced severe dehumanization and humiliation. Through their literature, they began to voice the pain and suffering they have endured for generations. This expression often takes the form of anger, cries for justice, and sometimes even harsh language. Awakening to their plight, Dalits have started to reject the culture of injustice, questioning the validity of the long-standing social structure. In a notable article featured in the special Diwali issue of *Asmitadarsh*, Dr. Bhalchandra Phadke advocates for a distinct aesthetic rooted in Dalit Literary Creativity. He argues that a deep understanding of Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy, the influence of the Dalit Movement on literature, the unique nature of Dalit Literature, as well as its myths, imagery, and language, reveals that traditional aesthetics fall short in properly assessing Dalit Literature. Dr. Phadke observes that prevailing aesthetic standards are often tied to class or caste distinctions.

Dalit literature emerges as a powerful voice of protest, illuminating the dynamics between the powerful and the powerless, oppressor and oppressed, and exploiters and exploited. It captures the harsh realities of life, the struggle for identity, and the quest for liberty, equality, and fraternity. These themes are conveyed through various literary forms, including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, autobiographies, and critical prose.

The core principles of Buddhist Socialism and Dalit Consciousness set Dalit Literature apart from traditional

literature. While conventional literature often leans on imagination and fantasy, Dalit Literature dives deep into the realities faced by Dalits. Dalit writers argue that the lack of *Dalit Consciousness* in mainstream literature makes it unreasonable to assess Dalit Literature through those lenses. Championing the idea of distinct *Dalit Aesthetics*, Dr. Shatrughna Jadhav states, "The demand for separate Dalit aesthetics arises from the unique nature of Dalit literature. Appreciating and evaluating Dalit literature cannot be achieved through conventional frameworks or Mardhekar's theory, given that the form and essence of Dalit literature differ significantly. Themes such as Rejection, Suffering, Protest, and Agitation are foreign to conventional literature" (Jadhav 2003: 67). Furthermore, Dalit writers contend that the eight Rasa articulated in classical aesthetics fail to do justice to Dalit Literature since both genres emerge from entirely different traditions. Dr. Yashwant Manohar suggests that aesthetics should not be confined by limitations but should celebrate values. In our evolving landscape of values, various significant principles maintain their individuality. Among these is Marxist aesthetics. Thus, it begs the question: why can't the values inspired by Dr. Ambedkar be embraced as Dalit Aesthetics or Ambedkarite Aesthetics?

Omprakash Valmiki argues that "the aesthetics of Hindi literature are rooted in both Sanskrit and Western traditions. As a result, these frameworks fall short when it comes to evaluating Dalit literature. Sanskrit literature's foundation is rooted in feudalism and Brahmanism, while Western literary aesthetics are shaped by capitalism and feudalism" (Valmiki 2005: 45). Sharankumar Limbale echoes this sentiment, claiming that "Dalit literature is a fresh literary movement that emerged post-independence. It is not only novel but also distinct in its forms and objectives from savarna Marathi literature. Therefore, it cannot be judged by traditional aesthetic standards" (Limbale 2004: 115). Limbale also points

out that "the Dalit literature movement took shape during a period of cultural transition (following conversion), with neo-Buddhist scholars anticipating that this new literary movement would be evaluated through the lens of Buddhist philosophy" (Limbale 2004: 41). Dalit literature explores the identity struggles of Dalits in India, paralleling the experiences of Black individuals in America. Its primary aim is not to entertain but to challenge readers by confronting them with the harsh realities of Dalit life. This underscores that the issues addressed in Dalit literature are distinct, highlighting unique challenges faced by Dalits. Given these circumstances, Dalit writer-critics contend that conventional literary standards do not apply to their work.

In Indian aesthetics, the values *of Satyam (Truth), Shivam (Goodness)*, and *Sundaram (Beauty)* are traditionally regarded as the foundational cultural ideals through which literature is evaluated. However, according to Sharankumar Limbale, the concept of Satyam as presented in Hindu scriptures is inherently flawed. He critiques the claim that a Brahmin is born from Brahma's mouth while a Shudra emerges from his feet, arguing that such a narrative represents not truth but falsehood, as it justifies caste-based hierarchy and discrimination. For Limbale, such oppressive ideology cannot be considered *Shivam, or good.* If Dalits are deemed impure by touch, shadow, or speech, and denied the right to own property, attain education, or gain social respect, then the system that enforces these injustices cannot embody goodness. Similarly, if Dalits are forced to live degraded, untouchable, and uncultured lives under threat of severe punishment for defying these norms then such existence cannot be considered Sundaram, or beautiful. In response, Limbale argues for a redefinition of values rooted in liberty, equality, and fraternity. He proposes a new understanding: a human being, by their very existence, is *Satyam (truth);* the liberation of the human

being is *Shivam (goodness);* and the humanity of the individual is Sundaram (beauty).

Over the past six decades, Dalit intellectuals and writers have identified distinct elements within Dalit literature that set it apart. These elements stem from the emancipatory movements inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. They reflect the convergence of Buddhism and Ambedkarite philosophy, both committed to the upliftment and welfare of humanity. Writers such as Sharankumar Limbale and Omprakash Valmiki have affirmed these elements often scattered across critical writings and speeches by Dalit thinkers as key indicators for evaluating Dalit literature.

Dalit Consciousness "Chetana"

What sets Dalit literature apart from conventional literature is its distinct sense of *consciousness.* This consciousness reflects an awareness of the Dalit's right to live with dignity, seeking liberty in political, socio-economic, and cultural spheres. The intensity of the Dalit Movement gained momentum through Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's monumental efforts toward Dalit emancipation. Dalit consciousness embodies two major dimensions: first, the embrace of human values advocated by the Buddha and upheld by Dr. Ambedkar; and second, the rejection of an unjust social order rooted in oppression and caste-based discrimination. Sharankumar Limbale defines *Dalit consciousness* as "a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus" (Limbale, 2004: 32). This awakening within the Dalit community was catalyzed by Dr. Ambedkar's leadership, making *Dalit consciousness* inherently political. Dr. Pradeep Sharma, in his book Dalit Politics and Literature, identifies it as a form of political consciousness that manifested during the Dalit Movement.

Omprakash Valmiki further deepens the concept by linking Dalit Chetana (Dalit consciousness) to existential questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is my identity?" These questions became the driving force behind the creative expression of Dalit writers. For Valmiki, Dalit Chetana goes beyond merely recounting suffering or expressing pain in sentimental language. Instead, it embodies a visionary stance aimed at breaking the socio-cultural and historical constraints imposed on Dalits. He sees its core inspiration in the life and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar. Thus, Dalit consciousness forms the defining boundary between conventional literature and Dalit literature, rooted not only in expression but also in resistance, transformation, and identity.

1. Rejection and Protest as Nature of Dalit Literature

According to Waman Nimbalkar, the condition of Dalits in India has historically been one of severe insult and degradation. In response, Dalit literature emerged with the Dalit at its core, much like how the Buddha placed the human being at the center of his philosophy. For Nimbalkar, Dalit literature emphasizes humanism, holistic development, moral and conscientious thought, and the complete liberation of the individual. Thus, Dalit literature, in his view, protests against and seeks to dismantle the notion of *"Dalitness"* itself. Valmiki similarly describes Dalit literature as inherently oppositional and symbolic of protest. He argues that it reflects a deep social commitment and engages with the nuances of human sensitivity (Valmiki 2005: 16). Sharankumar Limbale, commenting on this spirit of rejection and revolt within Dalit literature, concurs with other Dalit thinkers. He writes: "This rejection is aimed at the unequal order which has exploited Dalits. Its form is double-edged rejecting the unequal order, and demanding equality, liberty, fraternity and justice… Revolt is the stage that follows anguish and rejection. 'I am a human;

I must receive all the rights of human beings' such is the consciousness that gives birth to this revolt" (Limbale 2004: 31).

2. Suffering (Pain)

Suffering occupies a central place in Dalit literary criticism, serving as its most essential element. In Indian society, Dalits have inherited nothing but suffering, perpetuated through religious traditions and a caste-based social hierarchy. Their experiences of marginalization, de-humanization, untouchability, poverty, and systemic oppression have shaped their collective identity. As a result, Dalit writers consistently reflect these harsh realities in their literary works.

Prominent Marathi critic Dr. Bhachandra Phadke and Dalit playwright Datta Bhagat emphasize that pain forms the core thread in evaluating Dalit literature. According to them, suffering is not just a theme but a framework through which Dalit writing should be understood. Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki observes that the Dalit author is deeply connected to their community. In their writing, the personal is inherently collective when they say "I," it signifies "we." For Valmiki, social consciousness is paramount, and the suffering of the community brings deeper anguish than personal pain. His literary mission, therefore, is to expose and challenge these collective sufferings through his creative work (Valmiki 2005: 40). Valmiki also critiques representations of Dalit life by non-Dalit writers, such as in Amritlal Nagar's *Nachyo Bahut Gopal*, arguing that such portrayals lack authentic *Dalit consciousness (Dalit Chetna)*. He firmly asserts that only Dalits can authentically speak to their own experiences of suffering. Echoing Valmiki's stance, Sharankumar Limbale also stresses that the "I" in Dalit literature symbolizes a collective voice. He writes, "It is not the pain of any one person, nor is it of just one day it is the anguish of many thousands of people,

experienced over thousands of years. Therefore, it is expressed collectively" (Limbale 2004: 31).

3. Revolt

Revolt occupies a central position in the framework of Dalit literary criticism and is recognized as a foundational element in the Dalit movement. The articulation of *revolt* within Dalit literature finds its roots in the sociopolitical activism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, whose mobilization of the oppressed castes marked a decisive departure from passive suffering to active resistance. According to Sharankumar Limbale (2004), the thematic presence of *'rejection'* and *'revolt'* in Dalit literature emerges directly from the lived experiences of pain and marginalization endured by Dalit communities. Limbale posits that revolt is a developmental stage that follows anguish and rejection, catalyzed by the realization of one's inherent humanity and dignity (Limbale 2004: 31). Dalit literature, in this sense, serves not only as a medium of expression but also as a form of resistance, constructing images of suffering drawn from experiential realities and foregrounding the collective uprising against systemic oppression and caste-based subjugation. The literary expression of revolt is thus both aesthetic and political. Further, Dalit scholar Dr. Janardan Waghmare, in his address at the *Dalit, Adivasi, Gamin Sahitya Sammelan (1988),* traced the genealogy of this spirit of resistance to social reformers such as Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, who actively challenged the hierarchical caste system prior to Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar's relentless struggle against caste oppression, as Waghmare emphasizes, institutionalized the discourse of revolt within Dalit political and literary traditions. Consequently, the motif of revolt emerges organically in Dalit writings, functioning as both a response to historical injustice and a call for transformative social change.

4. Experience:

Dalit literature is fundamentally rooted in *the lived experiences of suffering, marginalization*, and *systemic oppression* borne out of caste-based discrimination. Central to this literary tradition are themes such as rootlessness, exclusion, humiliation, and pain, which reflect the historical and social realities faced by Dalit communities. Dalit writers often draw directly from their personal and collective experiences to construct narratives that are both testimonial and transformative. This experiential authenticity, as argued by Sharankumar Limbale, constitutes the unique essence of Dalit literature. According to Limbale, the experiences articulated in *Dalit texts* are unprecedented in their representation; they have not been captured by any other literary tradition, as they emerge from a distinct socio-cultural and historical context. These narratives underscore the Buddhist humanist ethos of recognizing and respecting every individual's humanity. Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki affirms Limbale's position by emphasizing the centrality of experience in Dalit writing. He contends that non-Dalit writers are inherently limited in their capacity to authentically portray Dalit suffering, as they lack the experiential foundation required to fully comprehend it. Consequently, portrayals of Dalit pain in non-Dalit literature often serve a sympathetic function rather than catalyzing substantive social transformation. Thus, Dalit literature is not merely a literary expression but a vehicle for asserting identity, resistance, and the demand for social justice.

5. Commitment:

Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's social revolutionary movements, Dalit writers exhibit a profound *commitment to the welfare* of their community. Limbale emphasizes the significance of this dedication, particularly highlighting the responsibility Dalit writers bear towards the most marginalized members of their society. According to Limbale "Dalit writers

write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems their writing articulates this impatience with intensity." (Limbale, 2004: 33) Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki recognizes the emerging potential within Dalit literature to critically examine its societal role and social responsibilities, underscoring the writers' steadfast commitment to social transformation.

Dalit Literature and Buddhist Socialism:

The Dalit Literary Movement emerged fundamentally as a socio-cultural initiative aimed at the emancipation of the Dalit community. A significant transformation began in 1956, coinciding with the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was revered as their emancipator. This conversion initiated profound socio-cultural changes, as the Dalits consciously adopted new social values that reshaped their collective identity. The embrace of Buddhism facilitated the rejection of the stigmatized and marginalized identity imposed upon them by the Hindu caste system, fostering the construction of a distinct Buddhist identity.

The literature produced by these neo-Buddhist Dalits played a critical role in practicing and disseminating core social values such as liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. As articulated by Waman Nimbalkar, Dalit literature "depicts the graph of progress of every man" and vehemently advocates for essential human values including: *equality, liberty, fraternity, justice, intellect (Pradnya), character (Sheel),* and *compassion (Karuna)* (Nimbalkar, 2006, 37). This literary corpus upholds the principles of Buddhist socialism, a philosophical framework strongly promoted by Dr. Ambedkar. Further emphasizing the priorities of Dalit literature, Omprakash Valmiki asserts that the "aspect of human liberty and its expression is the priority of Dalit literature, highlighting that this liberty transcends

political dimensions to encompass religious, economic, and social spheres" (Valmiki, 2005, 62). Similarly, Namdeo Dhasal Limbale explicates the ideals of Buddhist socialism as reflected in Dalit literary works, stating that "every human being must find liberty, honour, security, and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society and that these values are distinctly articulated through Dalit literature" (Limbale, 2004, 30). Collectively, these perspectives underscore the integral role of Dalit literature in not only reflecting but also actively shaping the socio-political consciousness of the Dalit community through the propagation of transformative social values rooted in Buddhist philosophy and Ambedkarite ideology.

Debates on Authorship and Linguistic Characteristics in Dalit Literature:

Over the past several decades, a significant debate has emerged among Dalit and non-Dalit writers regarding the authorship of Dalit literature, specifically focusing on who is entitled to write within this genre. This discourse intensified in response to claims made by some non-Dalit authors asserting that their writings on Dalit experiences and issues should be considered part of Dalit literature. Scholars such as Sharankumar Limbale challenge this position, asserting that "by Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus" (Limbale, 2004, 49). Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki echoes this perspective, noting that while some intellectuals, writers, and critics argue that one need not be Dalit to write about Dalits comparable to the claim that one need not be a horse to write about a horse Dalit writers fundamentally disagree. Valmiki contends that "without realizing the pain of the horse, its external portrayal would be

like fantasizing sketches of its emotions. What sort of emotion that tired, hungry and thirsty horse keeps for his owner that horse only could express" (Valmiki, 2005, 36). The linguistic and aesthetic qualities of Dalit literature have also been subject to scrutiny, particularly by traditional aestheticians who have often characterized its language as uncultured, crude, and lacking in figurative elegance. The diction employed has been labeled coarse and vulgar, which explains the severe criticism faced by Namdeo Dhasal's seminal work *Golpitha*. Nevertheless, Golpitha has since been recognized as a classic within Dalit literary canon. This criticism must be contextualized within the socio-economic realities of Dalit communities, who often reside in marginalized ghettos characterized by hardship and social exclusion. The linguistic expressions found in Dalit literature marked by their intensity, sarcasm, and occasional use of abusive language are understood as authentic reflections of lived experiences and justified responses to systemic injustice. Such reactions, including the negative portrayal of conventional characters, are defensible within the framework of emerging Dalit aesthetics, which emphasize protest and resistance as central motifs.

Sharankumar Limbale emphasizes the distinctiveness of Dalit literary language, describing it as "the uncouth impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of Dalits; this language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar" (Limbale, 2004, 33). Valmiki further defends this linguistic departure from traditional literary norms by highlighting that Dalit literature rejects conventional objective literary language and poetic styles in favor of a vernacular medium that truthfully conveys the pain, insults, and historical suffering of Dalit communities. He frames Dalit literary language as one of rejection and protest, carrying the weight of centuries of oppression. Valmiki also critiques mainstream literary criticism for its ignorance of the socio-cultural realities reflected in Dalit linguistic expressions, arguing that such critiques fail to

recognize the vibrancy and vitality that Dalit literature introduces by breaking the linguistic hegemony of dominant cultural narratives. Dalits' lived environments often impoverished ghettos with harsh realities unknown to mainstream critics shape the rawness and immediacy of their language. Thus, labeling Dalit literary language as obscene reflects entrenched prejudice rather than an informed literary judgment. Ultimately, the prosaic and confrontational nature of Dalit language serves as a potent vehicle for articulating lives marked by controversy, exploitation, and systemic oppression.

Reinterpretation of Epic Characters in Dalit Literature: Contesting Traditional Narratives

Many prominent characters from popular Indian epics and scriptures prominently feature in both traditional literature and Dalit literary discourse. However, the representation of these figures within these contrasting literary traditions remains a subject of significant debate and contestation. For instance, Dronacharya is traditionally depicted as an ideal guru in classical texts, whereas Dalit literature often portrays him negatively, emphasizing his injustice towards Eklavya a marginalized figure. Similarly, the killings of *Shambuka* in the *Ramayana* and *Karna in the Mahabharata* are justified within conventional narratives, but these acts are critically condemned in Dalit literary works.

Scholar Dr. M. N. Wankhede underscores the essential role of myth in Dalit literature but simultaneously cautions Dalit writers against uncritically accepting Hindu myths. He advocates for the creation of new heroes rooted in historical realities, proposing that figures from the life of Buddha and his disciples serve as viable alternatives for constructing such heroic narratives. This viewpoint aligns with the perspectives of scholars such as Prof. M. P. Rege, M. B. Chitnis, and R. G. Jadhav, who similarly encourage Dalit writers to forge new mythologies drawing on *Buddhist philosophy* and history. Neha

Arora observes that Dalit literature has not only generated new myths but also fundamentally redefined the very concept of myth. By challenging established falsehoods and dismantling the 'magical' or miraculous elements (chamatkar) traditionally associated with myths, Dalit narratives present substantiated experiences that lend these new myths a distinct credibility. Moreover, Dalit literature boldly reinterprets ancient heroes as modern-day villains, subverting conventional valorization.

Harinarayan Thakur notes that Dalit literature engages in a profound redefinition of scriptural myths those concerning life and death, disaster and nurture, divine and demonic figures. Iconic characters such as *Shambuka, Karna, Eklavya, Sita, Draupadi,* as well as stories of *Rama* and *Krishna*, acquire novel meanings and contexts within Dalit literary frameworks. Particularly, marginalized scriptural figures like *Karna, Eklavya,* and *Shambuka* are recast as heroes emblematic of Dalit resistance and identity. Reflecting this transformative approach, the Dalit poet Omprakash Valmiki asserts that Dalit writers have articulated the inequalities and social realities of contemporary Dalit existence through re-appropriated myths drawn from history and scripture. According to Valmiki, "characters such as Karna, Eklavya, Shambuka, and Sita symbolize the Dalit struggle against systemic oppression." (Valmiki, 2005: 88), In light of these reinterpretations, Dalit writers challenge the applicability of conventional aesthetic frameworks, particularly when such frameworks traditionally celebrate characters whom Dalit literature exposes as oppressors or villains. This critical interrogation of established aesthetics highlights the broader ideological stakes involved in the literary representation of marginalized identities and histories.

The conceptual framework of the emerging Dalit Literary Theory, commonly referred to as *Dalit Aesthetics*, has evolved through a sustained process of literary creation and critical

engagement with Dalit literature, informed by Buddhist philosophy and Ambedkarite thought. This theoretical development has been primarily shaped by Dalit intellectuals over the past six decades. Pioneering contributions by Dalit thinker-writers Sharankumar Limbale and Omprakash Valmiki most notably through their seminal critical works Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature respectively have been instrumental in articulating the contours of this new literary paradigm.

These scholars have also initiated a comparative discourse between *Dalit Aesthetics* and *Black Aesthetics*, the latter being a literary theory advanced by African American writers as a form of resistance against dominant white cultural hegemony. This parallel underscores a shared endeavor among marginalized communities to formulate distinctive aesthetic principles rooted in their socio-political realities.

In his exploration of beauty and pleasure within the context of *Dalit aesthetics*, Limbale posits that traditional conceptions of beauty are intrinsically linked to feelings of pleasure and empathy experienced by the viewer. Such affective responses are central to the engagement of the aesthete, who, according to Limbale, possesses a unique capacity to appreciate beauty beyond mere sensory perception. He argues that the aesthete's sensibility is cultivated through cultural and circumstantial influences, and that aesthetic experience is inherently particular dependent on specific objects, individuals, and contexts. Consequently, Limbale rejects the notion of a universal or generalized standard of beauty, asserting: "The aesthete is a product of circumstances. But in the process of taste, the aesthete is as important as the artist and the artistic situation. And this is why one must recognize that beauty-related experiences are object-specific, person-specific, and situation-specific there cannot be a general concept of beauty" (Limbale, 2004, 114).

Further distinguishing Dalit literature from dominant Marathi literary traditions, Limbale highlights differences in both form and philosophical underpinnings. He contends that while the aesthetics of Marathi savarna (upper-caste) literature is predicated on pleasure, *Dalit aesthetics* is fundamentally grounded in pain and suffering. This divergence raises critical questions about the applicability of conventional aesthetic theories to Dalit literary works, particularly regarding their conception of beauty. Limbale challenges mainstream aestheticians to reconcile their frameworks with the lived realities and consciousness embodied in Dalit literature, which privileges social values over aesthetic pleasure. He calls for a redefinition of 'imaginary beauty' to better align with Dalit critical perspectives.

Similarly, Valmiki emphasizes the temporal and mutable nature of beauty and its ideals, asserting that, like nature, literature, society, and thought, aesthetic values are subject to continual change: "There is no permanent theory as such on the basis of which values of beauty could be decided" (Valmiki, 2005, 59). Both Limbale and Valmiki argue for a dynamic understanding of beauty that evolves in response to changing social and historical conditions. Limbale further critiques traditional aesthetics as overly abstruse and spiritualistic qualities that stand in stark contrast to Dalit literature's materialistic and concrete engagement with social realities. For Dalit writers and critics, aesthetic evaluation cannot be confined within the spiritualized paradigms dominant in canonical literary criticism, but must instead reflect the tangible experiences of oppression, resistance, and survival that define Dalit existence.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the corpus of Dalit literature is profoundly influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's transformative ideology advocating social change. Consequently, Dalit literature primarily functions as a vehicle

for social awareness and critique. Central to Dalit aesthetics are the Buddhist social values of liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice, which serve as foundational principles guiding this literary tradition. The aesthetic framework of Dalit literature is thus intrinsically linked to the social consciousness and ideological commitment of its creators. This orientation shapes the representation of community realities, highlighting experiences of marginalization, suffering, and the collective struggle for social emancipation.

Regarding the aesthetic evaluation of Dalit literature, Limbale maintained, "The standard of a work of literature depends on how much and in what way an artist's ideas-embedded in the work-affect the reader. Dalit writers will have to decide how best to express Ambedkarite thought in their literature. This work of dalit literature will be recognizing as beautiful, and therefore, 'good', which causes the greatest awakening of dalit consciousness in the reader."(Limbale 2004: 117)

Limbale articulates a clear position regarding the inapplicability of traditional aesthetics to Dalit literature, arguing that Dalit writers prioritize social issues over the entertainment of readers, thereby diverging from conventional aesthetic values that are predominantly centered on the experience of the aesthete-reader. This perspective is echoed by Omprakash Valmiki, who critiques traditional literature's focus on rasa as a source of pleasure, asserting: "What is the purpose of traditional literature origin of rasa for pleasure? The pleasure which is momentary is not acceptable in Dalit literature. A Dalit who has experienced pain and suffering from exploitation how could that be pleasurable?" (Valmiki 2005: 50). Valmiki contends that Dalit literature fundamentally expresses lived experiences, and its value does not reside in worldly beauty or the mere magic of words. Instead, it

embraces a seriousness of meaning that aligns with Dalit life ideals, which form the foundation of Dalit aesthetics.

Valmiki explicitly rejects traditional aesthetic theories, which conceive beauty as a phenomenon detached from material reality. For him, nature and its elements are neither inherently beautiful nor ugly; rather, the emotional response to beauty arises from historical and social conditions, a position resonant with Marxist thought. Valmiki critiques the notion that aesthetics can be divorced from considerations of caste, class, and ideology, describing such claims as naïve. He redefines aesthetics not as a transcendental experience of art but as a theoretical framework for understanding beauty and values one intrinsically shaped by social factors including caste, class, and gender. Consequently, the development of Dalit aesthetics is contingent upon the socio-cultural context of Dalit society, encompassing its collective consciousness, culture, philosophy, and literature.

Limbale advances a significant proposition regarding Dalit aesthetics, emphasizing the centrality of the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity as foundational elements of beauty in Dalit literature. He argues that Dalit literature is fundamentally concerned with the quest for freedom and its expressive articulation. The notion of freedom permeates Dalit literature, not only as its vital essence but also as an aesthetic principle. Consequently, Limbale accords paramount importance to 'freedom' as a defining element of beauty within this literary tradition. According to Limbale, the aesthetics of Dalit literature are grounded in three core criteria: first, the social commitment of the artist; second, the presence of life-affirming values within the artistic creation; and third, the capacity of the work to elevate the reader's awareness of essential values such as equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity. These parameters serve both as guiding principles

for Dalit literary creativity and as evaluative criteria for assessing the quality and impact of Dalit literary works.

In addition, Limbale proposes four standards for the evaluation of Dalit literature: the artist's motivation must stem from personal experience; the artist must effectively communicate and socialize this experience; the experience should possess the strength to transcend provincial or regional boundaries; and the artist's experience must hold relevance across temporal contexts. These evaluative standards reflect Limbale's nuanced understanding of Dalit literary creativity and his deep engagement with the Dalit literary movement. The critical contributions of Limbale and Valmiki in articulating the framework of Dalit aesthetics are poised to offer substantial guidance to both writers and scholars, thereby enriching and completing the discourse on Dalit aesthetics in the future.

In the conclusion, over the past six decades, the relatively modest efforts of Dalit intellectuals to develop conceptual frameworks and evaluative indicators for understanding Dalit literature have functioned analogously to lighthouses positioned along various shores, guiding critical inquiry and interpretation. In contemporary literary discourse, most literatures increasingly appropriate philosophies and aesthetic principles drawn from classical traditions, Western critical theories, and ancient Indian scriptures. However, Dalit intellectuals and creative writers have, over the last sixty years, articulated distinctive critical methodologies that represent a marked departure from conventional aesthetic norms. These efforts have established a robust foundation enabling both Dalit and sympathetic non-Dalit critics to engage in rigorous, in-depth analysis and research of Dalit literary production.

The criteria employed in evaluating Dalit literature are fundamentally rooted in the broader Dalit emancipation movement initiated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and other

revolutionaries. Foundational elements articulated by scholars such as M. M. Kalburgi, Sharankumar Limbale, and Omprakash Valmiki namely *Dalit consciousness, rejection* and *protest, suffering, revolt, commitment*, and *lived experience* serve as guiding principles in the critical assessment of Dalit literary texts. Notably, Limbale and Valmiki's reflections on the concepts of *'beauty'* and *'pleasure'* challenge traditional aesthetic categories, arguing that the conventional literary standards of beauty often mask and perpetuate caste-based exploitation. Instead, these writers advocate for alternative aesthetic values grounded in principles of liberty, equality, solidarity, and justice, which more authentically represent Dalit lived realities.

While Limbale, Valmiki, and others have contributed significantly to the articulation of *Dalit aesthetics*, there remains a need for deeper engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of *Buddhism* and *Ambedkarism*, particularly concerning concepts of beauty, pleasure, and elements of Buddhist humanism such as compassion, love, equanimity, and empathy. Given that a majority of Dalit writers identify with Buddhism, several Dalit and non-Dalit scholars have recognized the potential for Buddhist philosophy to enrich and expand the theoretical framework of *Dalit aesthetics*. Consequently, further scholarly exploration of these intersections is imperative for a more comprehensive understanding of Dalit literary criticism and aesthetics.

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